The New Criterion

September 1995

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
Mondrian & mysticism *by Hilton Kramer*, 4
Jane Austen for the Nineties *by Brooke Allen*, 15
Brancusi in Paris *by Karen Wilkin*, 23
Saul Bellow's Broadway *by Cynthia Ozick*, 29
New poems *by Louis Simpson, Elizabeth Spires & Wyatt Prunty*, 37

Theater: Summer roundup *by Mark Steyn*, 42; **Art:** Florine Stettheimer at the Whitney *by Mario Naves*, 48; **Music:** Jascha Heifetz *by Tim Page*, 52; **The media:** Bob Dole's Hollywood, Disney's ABC *by James Bowman*, 57 **Books:** *Philip Roth* Sabbath's theater *reviewed by James Wolcott*, 62; *Mark Polizzotti* Revolution of the mind: the life of André Breton *reviewed by Stephen Sartarelli*, 67; *Samuel Hynes et al., editors* Reporting World War II *reviewed by Philip Terzian*, 72; **Shorter notices** *by Roger Kimball & Donald Lyons*, 75; **Notebook:** The Robert Hughes medicine show *by Roger Kimball*, 78

Volume 14, Number 1, $4.75

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Larry Cohen

Paintings

Nathan Oliveira

Paintings

September 6 to 30

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

20 East 79 Street New York 10021 Tel (212) 879-6606

Monday-Saturday 9:30 to 5:30

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SEEING THINGS

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM

1844 TO 1995

SEPTEMBER 7 – OCTOBER 7

JEAN DUBUFFET

THE EARLY 80's

SEPTEMBER 5 – 30

ANDRE EMMERICH GALLERY

41 East 57 Street New York 10022

telephone 212 752-0124 fax 371-7345

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MICHAEL MULHERN

NEW PAINTING

SEPTEMBER 14 — OCTOBER 14, 1995

ROSENBERG + KAUFMAN
FINE ART

119 WOOSTER STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10012
VOICE: 212 431 4838
FAX: 212 431 1067

"BEYOND THE OUTER BOROUGHS"

Summer Show June 1 to October 1, 1995

SAUL HAYMOND, SR.
Oils from Mississippi

PAUL HOLLISTER
Pastels from Cape Cod

KERSTIN NICHOLS
Glass Creations from Vermont

RONNI SOLBERT
Works in Wood and Metal from Vermont

ATELIER A/E ENT.
323 WEST 22ND STREET
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10011
TELEPHONE: 212.620.8103
FAX: 212.620.8106

HOURS:
FRIDAYS, SATURDAYS,
AND SUNDAYS 12-6
AND BY APPOINTMENT

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *September 1995*

Editor & Publisher *Hilton Kramer*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Associate Editor *Christopher Carduff*
Assistant Editor *David Yezzi*
Office Manager *Marjorie Danser*

Publisher 1982–1994 *Samuel Lipman*

Contributors to this issue

Brooke Allen reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications.

James Bowman is the American editor of the London *Times Literary Supplement*.

Roger Kimball is the author of *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (HarperPerennial).

Donald Lyons is the theater critic of *The Wall Street Journal* and the author of *Independent Visions* (Ballantine).

Mario Naves is an artist based in New York.

Cynthia Ozick's collection of literary essays *Fame & Folly* is forthcoming from Knopf.

Tim Page is the new chief classical-music critic of *The Washington Post*. *The Diaries of Dawn Powell, 1931-1965*, which he has edited, will be published this fall by Steerforth Press.

Wyatt Prunty's most recent book of poems is *The Run of the House* (Johns Hopkins).

Stephen Sartarelli is a poet and translator living in upstate New York.

Louis Simpson's forthcoming book of poems, *There You Are*, is due out this month from Story Line Press.

Elizabeth Spires's new book of poems, *Worldling*, is forthcoming from Norton.

Mark Steyn hosted this summer's Glyndebourne Opera broadcasts on London's Channel 4.

Philip Terzian writes a column from Washington for *The Providence Journal*.

Karen Wilkin is at work on a book about Giorgio Morandi.

James Wolcott writes regularly for *The New Yorker*.

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. September 1995, Volume 14, Number 1. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Outside the United States, add $7 per year. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. Copyright © 1995 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 2020 Superior Street, Sandusky, OH 44870. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date.

Advertising: Galleries & fine arts: Fred Stern, 44 Paulin Boulevard, Leonia, NJ 07605. (201) 947-2674.
Publishers & others: Richard A. Vaughan, 129 Phelps Avenue, Rockford, IL 61108. (815) 398-8569.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

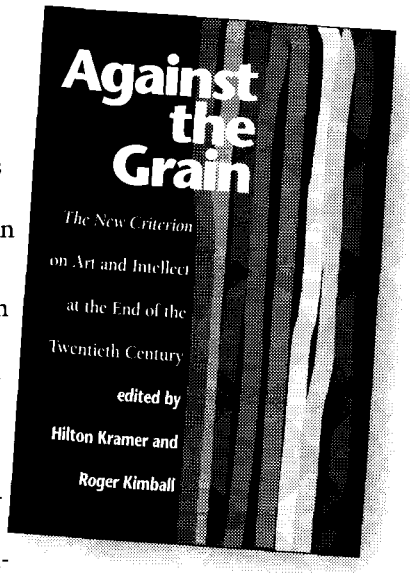
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A cornucopia of brilliant criticism from the pages of *The New Criterion*

Against the Grain

The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century

edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball



"As a critical periodical *The New Criterion* is probably more consistently worth reading than any other magazine in English."—Julian Symons, *Times Literary Supplement*

Against the Grain brings together more than forty incisive essays from the magazine that has emerged as the foremost voice of critical dissent in the culture wars. The writings challenge radical orthodoxies on a wide range of controversial subjects, from the philosophy of Michel Foucault to the apocalyptic kitsch of Anselm Kiefer, from the scandals of political correctness and multiculturalism to the state of Latin American literature and politics. Samuel Lipman writes on the future of classical music, Hilton Kramer on the plight of today's art museum, Joseph Epstein on the poet C. P. Cavafy, and Roger Kimball on the treason of the intellectuals.

The book includes pieces by Guy Davenport on Gertrude Stein, John Simon on Vladimir Nabokov, Donald Lyons on *Angels in America*, Richard Vine on Jean Baudrillard, Maurice Cowling on Raymond Williams, and H. J. Kaplan on Jean Genet. There are thoughtful reevaluations of such important cultural figures as T. E. Lawrence, Henry James, Harold Laski, A. E. Housman, Willem de Kooning, Frederick Douglass, and Philip Larkin. And much more.

Written with wit, clarity, and fierce independence, *Against the Grain* is a major contribution to sanity and common sense on the most contentious cultural issues of the day.

Just published, $35 hardcover, $16.95 paperback

Ivan R. Dee, Publisher
1332 North Halsted Street, Chicago 60622

At your bookseller, or order toll free 1-800-634-0226 with a major credit card.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes & Comments: September 1995

The voice of Neoconservatism

With the publication of a capacious volume of essays by Irving Kristol under the title *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*,[1] the movement set in motion by its author—a movement that began as a discussion of ideas and proved in time to have immense political consequences—may be said to have entered a new phase. No longer is Neoconservatism the preserve of a coterie of embattled intellectuals regarded with suspicion by conservatives and with a good deal of loathing and contempt by the liberal Left. Neoconservatism has now achieved a degree of legitimacy and influence that few of its acolytes could have imagined a quarter of a century ago. If not all of the ideas and criticisms contained in this book can yet be said to represent the conventional political wisdom of the 1990s, it is nonetheless remarkable to observe how many of its analyses and sentiments have permeated public debate. On a good many of the issues that have transformed the way the future of our society, and our world, is now discussed—issues ranging from the death of socialism and the problematical character of the welfare state to the adversary culture of American intellectuals and its baleful influence on education, the media, and public policy—it was largely the voice of Neoconservatism that formulated the arguments and framed the debate. And that voice, more often than not, was Irving Kristol's.

This is the reason that we regard the publication of *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, the most definitive collection of his writings that Mr. Kristol has given us, as an important event. Some of the individual essays in this book are almost as interesting for their original dates of publication as for their intellectual content—e.g., the essay "Welfare: The Best of Intentions, the Worst of Results," first published in 1971 and now indeed, nearly a quarter of a century later, does represent what has since become the established opinion on the subject. Or the essays "The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals," published in 1979, and "Socialism: An Obituary for an Idea," published in 1976. "What rules the world is ideas," Mr. Kristol wrote in his essay "On Conservatism and Capitalism" in 1975, "because ideas define the way reality is perceived; and, in the absence of religion, it is out of culture—pictures, poems, songs, philosophy—that these ideas are born." It was from this emphasis on ideas that the influence of Neoconservatism derived, and on the cogency of its ideas that its influence has prospered.

Especially for newcomers to the subject, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* is the book to read if you want to

1 *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, by Irving Kristol; The Free Press, 512 pages, $25.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

know what Neoconservatism is about but were afraid to ask. And as an inducement to that pursuit, we offer here some representative passages.

On the importance of ideas

For two centuries, the very important people who managed the affairs of this society could not believe in the importance of ideas—until one day they were shocked to discover that their children, having been captured and shaped by certain ideas, were either rebelling against their authority or seceding from their society. The truth is that ideas are *all*-important. The massive and seemingly-solid institutions of any society—the economic institutions, the political institutions, the religious institutions—are always at the mercy of the ideas in the heads of the people who populate these institutions. The leverage of ideas is so immense that a slight change in the intellectual climate can and will—perhaps slowly, but nevertheless inexorably—twist a familiar institution into an unrecognizable shape. If one looks at the major institutions of American society today—the schools, the family, the business corporation, the federal government—we can see this process going on before our eyes.

1973

On intellectuals under socialism

The fate of intellectuals under socialism is disillusionment, dissent, exile, silence. In politics, means determine ends, and socialism everywhere finds its incarnation in coercive bureaucracies that are contemptuously dismissive of the ideals that presumably legitimatize them, even while establishing these ideals as a petrified orthodoxy. The most interesting fact of contemporary intellectual life is the utter incapacity of so-called socialist countries to produce socialist intellectuals—or even, for that matter, to tolerate socialist intellectuals. If you want to meet active socialist intellectuals, you can go to Oxford or Berkeley or Paris or Rome. There is no point in going to Moscow or Peking or Belgrade or Bucharest or Havana. Socialism today is a dead end for the very intellectuals who have played so significant a role in moving the modern world down that street.

1979

On the "welfare explosion" since 1964

This "explosion" was created—in part intentionally, in larger part unwittingly—by public officials and public employees who were executing public policies as part of a "War on Poverty." And these policies had been advocated and enacted by many of the same people who were subsequently so bewildered by the "welfare explosion." Not surprisingly it took them a while to realize that the problem they were trying to solve was the problem they were creating.

1971

On welfare and the family

One must emphasize here that the question of race or ethnicity is of secondary importance. It is true that the Negro family has experienced historical vicissitudes that make it a relatively vulnerable institution. But it is also probable—I would go so far as to say certain—that if the Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century America had had something comparable to our present welfare system, there would have been a "welfare explosion" then, and a sharp increase in Irish family disorganization, too. The family is, in our society, a vital economic institution. Welfare robs it of its economic function. Above all, welfare robs the head of the household of *his* economic function, and tends to make him a "superfluous man." Welfare, it must be remembered, *competes* with his (usually low) earn-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing ability; and the more generous the welfare program, the worse he makes out in this competition.

1971

On multiculturalism & the universities

It is in its most intense and extreme form . . . that multiculturalism is on its way to being a major educational, social, and eventually political problem. This version is propagated on our college campuses by a coalition of nationalist-racist blacks, radical feminists, "gays" and lesbians, and a handful of aspiring demagogues who claim to represent various ethnic minorities. In this coalition, it is the blacks who provide the hard core of energy, because it is they who can intimidate the faculty and the administration, fearful of being branded "racist." This coalition's multiculturalism is an ideology whose educational program is subordinated to a political program that is, above all, anti-American and anti-Western.

1991

On the legacy of sexual liberation

"Sexual liberation," as it emerged in the 1950s, has turned out to be—as it was destined to be—a male scam. Easy, available sex is pleasing to men and debasing to women, who are used and abused in the process. Nevertheless, the agenda of a candid, casual attitude toward sex was vigorously sponsored by feminists who mistakenly perceived it as a step toward "equality." Even today there are some laggard feminists who are firmly persuaded that mixed dormitories and mixed bathrooms on a university campus represent such a step. But true equality between men and women can only be achieved by a moral code that offers women some protection against male predators—and all men are, to one degree or another, natural predators when it comes to sex.

1992

On the cultural revolution

From a dissenting culture to a counterculture, we have finally arrived at a nihilistic anticulture. This anticulture permits the postmodernists to abolish the distinction between what used to be called "highbrow" art—it also used to be called "culture," without equivocation—and "popular" culture. The modern movement in the arts, from 1870 to 1950, was distinctly "highbrow." It was "difficult," and it took decades for even our educated classes to feel comfortable with its works in literature and art. A whole new generation had to be trained to understand and appreciate T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce in literature, Picasso, Miró, and Klee in painting. Today, in contrast, at some of our best universities you can take a course for credit in the meaning of a popular comic strip, which explores the ways in which American society and Western civilization in general are infested with race, sex, and class antagonism. Indeed, many students in literature, the arts, and the humanities today, in pursuit of self-expression, reveal an extraordinary ignorance of, and lack of interest in, their avant-garde, modernist forebears. So antitraditional are they that they happily dispossess themselves of their formative, antibourgeois traditions. This explains why the mission of an institution such as the National Endowment for the Arts has become a mission impossible. The so-called "arts" it was founded to support have become enmeshed with "arts" that were unimaginable a few decades ago—indeed, that would never have been designated as "arts."

1992

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mondrian & mysticism: "My long search is over"

by Hilton Kramer

The irrational bears the same relation to the rational that the unknown bears to the known. In an age as harsh as it is intelligent, phrases about the unknown are quickly dismissed. I do not for a moment mean to indulge in mystical rhetoric, since, for my part, I have no patience with that sort of thing. That the unknown as the source of knowledge, as the object of thought, is part of the dynamics of the known does not permit of denial. . . . We accept the unknown even when we are most skeptical. We may resent the consideration of it by any except the most lucid mind; but when so considered, it has seductions more powerful and more profound than those of the known.

—Wallace Stevens, circa 1937

What was the nature of the quest that moved the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) to abandon the representation of nature in favor of an art of pure abstraction? What, exactly, did Mondrian *believe* that he had achieved? In any attempt to address this question, we are obliged to deal with the fact that abstract art—and not only Mondrian's—was born of an alliance of aesthetics and mysticism. We are obliged to examine the ideas that shaped the artist's search for the absolute in art. Ideas, of course, are no substitute for the experience of art, and in Mondrian's case are certainly not to be taken to be the "subject matter" of his painting. Yet without some grasp of the intellectual history that led the artist to make his fateful leap into abstraction, the spiritual imperative that governed Mondrian's art is unlikely to be understood. This is a subject that takes us into the mind of modernism at one of the key turning points of its history. It therefore seems an appropriate subject to explore on the occasion of the great Mondrian exhibition that opens next month at the Museum of Modern Art in New York—and all the more so since the exhibition itself, as it was presented at the National Gallery in Washington this summer, gave the subject scant attention. [1] In Professor Yve-Alain Bois's essay for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, for example, the author seems vaguely embarrassed that an artist of Mondrian's stature might be seen to be seriously implicated in a system of ideas and beliefs which for most of us cannot claim a very persuasive intellectual provenance.

It won't do to dismiss the issue with condescending references to Madame Blavatsky or attempts to substitute the ideas of more respectable thinkers like Goethe and Hegel in examining the intellectual origins of ab-

1 "Piet Mondrian: 1872–1944" was seen first at the Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague (December 18, 1994–April 30, 1995), then at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (June 11–September 4, 1995). It will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from October 1, 1995, through January 23, 1996. A catalogue has been published by Leonardo Arte and Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown (400 pages, $75; $32 paper).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

straction. For the problem posed by the relation that obtains between mystical belief and artistic innovation in the creation of abstraction is one that goes beyond Mondrian himself. In the period that saw the genesis of abstract art—roughly the decade beginning in 1910—what is particularly striking about the outlook of the artists primarily responsible for creating abstraction is their espousal of occult doctrine. So prevalent was a steadfast belief in the occult among the pioneers of abstract art—not only Mondrian but also Kandinsky, Malevich, and a good many of their disciples—that we have no alternative but to regard such doctrine as a basic component of their artistic vision.

It should be understood, however, that the particular school of mystical thought that exerted the greatest influence on the creation of abstract art—the system of occult belief generally known as theosophy—was in this period a widely established component of Western cultural life. While deliberately esoteric and by no means a popular creed, theosophy was not an interest limited to coteries of avant-garde painters and sculptors. Still less was it an interest confined to a circle of intellectual cranks and charlatans, though it did indeed attract a large number of crackpots and crazies. (It still does.) As Wallace Stevens was to observe some years later, "There are, naturally, charlatans of the irrational. That, however, does not require us to identify the irrational with the charlatans."

Still, it was an odd group of savants and mystagogues that shaped the course of modern theosophical thought, thereby exerting a decisive influence not only on the origins of abstract art but on other key developments in twentieth-century art and culture. The high priestess of the movement was indeed the Ukrainian-born adventuress Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), known to her followers the world over as H. P. B. She was said to have commanded occult powers from an early age. She certainly possessed a magnetic personality, making her way in the world—which in Blavatsky's case meant Europe, America, and Asia—as an emancipated woman without apparent means, yet always attracting (it seems) a circle of admiring men and women who believed in her spiritual gifts, supported her occult endeavors, propagated her theosophical doctrines, and remained undaunted by her scandalous reputation.

In New York, in 1875, H. P. B. founded the Theosophical Society, and promptly produced two large tomes—*Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888)—that became the sacred scriptures of the movement. The claim advanced by this movement, which came to be called the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, was that theosophy had triumphantly resolved the conflict between science and religion caused by the Darwinian theory of evolution. "It was the genius of H. P. B.," writes the historian James Webb in *The Occult Underground*, "to apply Darwin's theory to produce a *hopeful* resolution to the human condition." Webb continues:

> Whereas others saw only the destruction of the sustaining myth of man's divine origins, H. P. B. discovered that evolution could apply also to the "spiritual" aspects of existence. Man had evolved from apes—perhaps; but he had a noble destiny. Just as *homo sapiens* had evolved from a lower form of animal life, and that form in its turn from a lower—a vegetable, protoplastic, or unicellular existence—man as at present constituted was on his way to higher and better things. Evolution continued on a cosmic scale, with each individual born and reborn thousands of times until he had achieved earthly perfection.

To achieve the exalted goals that theosophy now invoked as a spiritual imperative for art, it was nonetheless necessary for art itself to remain firmly within the realm of aesthetic experience. An art born of an alliance of aesthetics and mysticism was still obliged to traffic in material objects, and thus remain accessible to visual perception, if its spiritual function were to be realized.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It could not—or not yet, anyway—so completely dematerialize itself as to become invisible if it were to continue to function as art. When the Epoch of the Great Spiritual was finally attained in some faraway future existence, no doubt this last concession to material contingency would be dispensed with; and art, too—to the extent that it continued to be needed—would become pure spirit.

But meanwhile, in the spiritually imperfect present, an art that aspired to make itself the instrument of pure spirit—to align itself with what Kandinsky described in *On the Spiritual in Art* as "the struggle toward the non-naturalistic, the abstract, toward inner nature"—had no alternative but to make its case as an earthly cultural enterprise. It thus remained subject, in this respect, to the "laws" and conventions and material conditions governing the medium in which the artist worked. It was for this reason that even the most mystical of the pioneer creators of abstract art found themselves engaged in a dialectic that embraced two very different aspirations—on the one hand, that of advanced artistic thought, with its headlong drive to discover new modalities of pictorial expression, and, on the other, that of a spiritual ideal that looked upon art as a means to an end that transcended art itself.

For observers who mistakenly tend to identify mysticism with a retreat from the practical affairs of the world, it must sometimes seem a paradox, if not an outright contradiction, that artists of a mystical temperament are perfectly capable of pursuing their worldly ambitions with the kind of uncompromising zeal that we observe in the careers of the early abstractionists. But the truth is that in every realm of high endeavor in which we find mysticism serving as a spur and an ideal—in movements of political revolution and campaigns for sexual emancipation, for example, no less than in avant-garde art movements—this loyalty to occult doctrine has proven to be a powerful incentive to practical achievement. Within the imaginative faculties there is nothing that so stirs the will to accomplish extraordinary things as the conviction that one is possessed of absolute knowledge about the ultimate destiny of human affairs. This was precisely the kind of mystical conviction that the pioneer creators of abstraction brought not only to their own innovations as artists but to the formation of avant-garde movements that changed the direction of modernist art and greatly expanded the place it would come to occupy in modern cultural life.

It is this belief in the absolute that accounts for the speed as well as the confidence which the pioneers of abstraction brought to their break with what they saw as the last vestiges of representation in art, and for the success they achieved in winning converts to their radical view of artistic expression. These artist-acolytes of the occult really did believe they were fulfilling a unique spiritual mission in this fateful act of artistic innovation, and they persuaded a great many others to join them in that belief. Theirs was, in this sense, a religious movement as well as an artistic one, and they brought to it the kind of intensely felt faith that we associate with spiritual yearning and religious conversion.

Yet it was as artists first of all, and only secondarily as exponents of the occult, that they exerted their deepest influence on art itself. In the latest developments of the art of their time, which in the case of Cubism had already brought painting to the very verge of abandoning representation, they shrewdly discerned a "logic" that cried out for completion. This gave to abstraction a powerful sense of purpose—a kind of ontological imperative—that was all the more compelling when combined with the promise of a spiritual vocation. As artists, the pioneers of abstraction had largely mastered in their earlier paintings the rapid succession of styles that had moved from Realism and Impressionism to the Post-Impressionist, Fauvist, Expressionist, and Cubist art which dominated the European avant-garde in the last decade of the nineteenth

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

century and the first decade of the twentieth. Because it was from inside this fast-paced arena of pictorial revision that Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich made their historic assault on what remained of traditional representation in art, their views as well as their example carried a special authority—particularly for the younger members of the avant-garde who harbored an intense appetite for the absolute and a headlong impatience to see it realized. For them, everything that had occurred in the history of painting from Courbet to Picasso was suddenly relegated to the past by this unexpected leap into abstraction. In their very different ways—for Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich, despite similar convictions about abstraction and the occult, were distinct individualists with quite separate programs for their art—the pioneers of abstraction opened up a new artistic world to their contemporaries. It was a world vastly different in its metaphysical and artistic outlook from that of the avant-garde movements which immediately preceded the emergence of abstraction.

Indeed, from the perspective of the modernist movement in Paris, where the prehistory of pictorial abstraction had largely taken place and which continued to command an unrivaled authority and influence as the capital of the international avant-garde, the new abstractionists signified something alien and suspect. The modernism of the School of Paris had been anything but monolithic, of course. Its cosmopolitanism was legendary, and it was justly famous for its receptivity to a wide range of advanced ideas and personalities. Theosophy and other theories of the occult were well-known there, too, though they did not lead to a movement advocating abstraction. In fact, none of the ideas contending for attention in the world of the Paris avant-garde openly advocated as *a matter of principle* the total rupture with representation then beginning to be championed by the pioneers of abstraction. Parisian modernism was, by and large, far too attached to the things of this world to forgo their pictorial representation as a permanent imperative. The Paris avant-garde was, in this respect, invincibly materialist in its outlook on life—still closely tied to observable sensation, and thus ineluctably earthbound in its basic character. However hermetic its allusions to the things of this world might at times become, Parisian modernism was nonetheless steadfast in its allegiance to them as an indispensable point of departure.

It was this allegiance to the things of this world that the mystagogic convictions of the new abstractionists now put into question for the first time, and it was for this reason, above all, that they were either ignored, rejected, or consigned to a marginal status by the Parisian avant-garde. (Even the quintessentially French color abstractions of Robert Delaunay, which the poet Apollinaire dubbed "Orphic Cubism" and which derived from the color theories of the Neo-Impressionists, were more sympathetically received in Germany than in Paris.) The doctrinaire abstraction that was rooted in theosophical ideas was therefore seen to constitute, in the early years of its development, a counter-avant-garde opposed to the mainstream artistic interests of the School of Paris. It was, as far as Paris was concerned, virtually an underground movement that did not enjoy the critical acclaim, or even the kind of critical scandal, that had marked the emergence of Fauvism and Cubism before the First World War and would again mark the emergence of Dada and Surrealism in the years following the war.

It was in advanced artistic circles outside of Paris—in Russia, Germany, and the Netherlands—that the new vision of the pioneer abstractionists met with the most combustible and consequential response. Of the vanguard figures who set out to create an abstract art based on a visionary synthesis of aesthetics and mysticism, only Mondrian lived and worked in Paris for extended periods of his development, first in the years between 1912 and 1914 and then again from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

1919 to 1938. It was in the first of these periods, when he remained virtually unknown to the Paris avant-garde, that Mondrian created his earliest abstract paintings.

Mondrian had made the decision to dedicate his life to art long before he turned to the occult, but it was as a dedicated theosophist that he created his first abstractions. After a strict Dutch Calvinist upbringing, he found in theosophy a refuge from the religious turmoil of his youth and early manhood. For a time he even kept a portrait of Madame Blavatsky on the wall of his studio—an icon of his spiritualist endeavors. (As Yeats later recalled, "To [Madame Blavatsky's] devout followers she was more than a human being.") In later life Mondrian's friends often spoke of his "priestly air," and there was no question but that for him the artistic vocation would never be entirely separable from his intense religious feelings.

Born in Amersfoort, Utrecht, the Netherlands, in 1872, Mondrian was educated at the Calvinist Primary School in Winterswijk, where his father—a stern disciplinarian—was headmaster. This was the only formal schooling Mondrian received before enrolling in the Academy of Art, in Amsterdam, in 1892. In his adolescence he was given some informal art instruction by his father, an amateur draftsman, and by an uncle, who was a professional painter in The Hague. His own development as a draftsman was sufficient to enable him to qualify, at the age of twenty, for the modest post of teacher of secondary-school drawing. This was his situation when he entered the Academy.

Nothing in Mondrian's early life as an art student or as a young exhibiting artist gives us any hint of the gifts that would one day make him a leader of the international avant-garde. He was anything but precocious. He attended the Academy off and on until 1896, and began exhibiting in Amsterdam the following year. But the pictures he then produced—at a time, it should be remembered, when Van Gogh and Seurat had already completed their work, when Cézanne was painting some of the greatest pictures of his late period, and Art Nouveau was the fashion—still consisted of naturalistic landscapes and still lifes in the Dutch academic tradition. Even by provincial academic standards, moreover, Mondrian's early career was anything but promising. In 1901, at the age twenty-nine, he failed to qualify for the Dutch *Prix de Rome*, owing to a lack of proficiency in rendering the figure. Henceforth, until his turn to abstraction, Mondrian's principal subject matter was landscape. He was also devoted to painting flowers, a practice that provided him with a living of sorts even after he had turned to abstraction.

Following the *Prix de Rome* fiasco, nearly a decade elapsed before any significant trace of modernist influence made itself felt in Mondrian's landscape painting. This was slow in coming for several reasons. Holland in the nineteenth century had remained something of an artistic backwater as far as modern painting was concerned. News of avant-garde developments in Paris and other cosmopolitan capitals did not easily penetrate the provincial art life of Amsterdam in Mondrian's student days. ("Van Gogh was dead," wrote Michel Seuphor of this period in Amsterdam, "but still unknown.") Shut off from such developments in a very conservative cultural milieu, Mondrian himself did not awaken to the implications of modernism until he was well into his thirties. This awakening occurred, as it happened, coincidentally with his formal commitment to theosophy.

It was thus around 1909—the year that Mondrian officially joined the Theosophical Society of Amsterdam, with a certificate of membership signed by Annie Besant—that he belatedly developed the rudiments of a modernist pictorial style. It began with a modified version of Seurat's Pointillist method, combined with a Symbolist attitude toward color, that was applied to the rendering of Dutch landscape motifs—haystacks, windmills, tree forms, and seaside dunes. This initial approach to an inde-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pendent style was already a step in the direction of abstraction, for nature was not so much described in these pictures of haystacks and dunes as made the point of departure for more emphatically articulated pictorial structures that relegated their subjects to a secondary status. Such pictures were, in any case, quickly succeeded by the artist's determination to submit these same landscape motifs to the even more radical Cubist innovations of Braque and Picasso, a few examples of which Mondrian saw for the first time in an Amsterdam exhibition in the fall of 1911. Those few proved to be enough to change everything.

Mondrian's encounter with Cubism was clearly the critical turning point of his artistic development. While it would be another year or two before he finally expunged the last traces of traditional representation from his painting, what can only be called his conversion to Cubism—now abetted by the anti-materialist imperatives of his theosophical faith—put Mondrian's life as an artist on an entirely new footing. Approaching his fortieth birthday, released at last from the tethers of academic tradition, philistine taste, and the provincial culture of his youth, Mondrian was ready to enter the ranks of the avant-garde. Artistically and spiritually, the obscure Dutch artist who finally quit Amsterdam for Paris in the last days of December 1911 was on his way to a new life—a life that in the coming decade would change the face of Western art.

"We may say," wrote Michel Seuphor in his study of Mondrian, "that it was in Paris in 1912 . . . that the life of the great painter began." It was, from the outset, a life of personal isolation, artistic dedication, and mystical reflection. The evidence suggests that it was also a life devoid of erotic engagement. Upon his arrival in Paris, where he lived and worked in a studio borrowed from a Dutch acquaintance, Mondrian had few friends, knew little French, and allowed himself almost no distractions. His first—indeed, his sole—priority was to come to terms with the Cubist ideas he had only just discovered.

To this task he now brought a sense of purpose that was entirely new to him. Quickly mastering the ambiguities that were central to the Cubist aesthetic—ambiguities that set the need for a recognizable motif dialectically at odds with a method of pictorial composition designed to eliminate its distinctive features—Mondrian painted with a confidence and drive he had never before enjoyed. His mission was at once exalted and implacable. Cubism became the battleground on which the artist who had been nurtured on the specifications of Dutch landscape painting fought his last protracted conflict with nature. In this struggle, Mondrian produced his first masterpieces—the series of *Compositions* based on tree forms in which the last remnants of naturalistic detail are no sooner evoked than all but extinguished in favor of pure painting.

Technically, Mondrian's tree *Compositions* of 1912–13 may not qualify as pure abstractions, for the presence of the fractured motif, while diminished almost to the point of extinction, is still minimally discernible. (This tends to be true of nearly all the earliest abstractions.) Yet aesthetically, in the way such pictures are experienced as integrated structures of pictorial form, they have unquestionably crossed the boundary separating abstraction from representation. And during the remainder of this first period of residence in Paris, Mondrian eliminated virtually all association with nature from his pictorial vocabulary. By imposing upon each successive painterly composition of soft-edged Cubist forms an increasingly insistent network of hard vertical and horizontal lines, he left no trace of—and finally no space for—an observed object or remembered motif.

The result was a series of paintings dominated by an irregular, improvised, and as yet unsystematic version of the abstract "grid" that, a few years hence, would become a compelling principle in Mondrian's classic geometrical abstractions. These first abstractions were not yet governed by any kind of absolute rule. They were not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

painted according to a theory. Mondrian was following the dictates of his sensibility—a sensibility that was then more confident, perhaps, about what it wished to eliminate than about what it wished to retain for painting—as he worked his way toward what he took to be "the logical consequences" of Cubism. Still, the artist who reluctantly returned to the Netherlands in the summer of 1914, on the eve of the First World War, had nonetheless succeeded in transforming the "logic" of Cubism into an art of abstraction. If he was not yet a recognized leader of the avant-garde—for abstraction was not itself a widely recognized artistic "cause"—he was already producing the kind of art that would serve as a foundation for a new movement. As Theo van Doesburg, the ideological leader of De Stijl, afterwards acknowledged: "Mondrian was the first to realize, in 1913, by a consistent elaboration of Cubism, this new plasticism as a painting."

What role did Mondrian's belief in the occult play in this headlong pursuit of abstraction? The notebooks in which he began, in 1914, to keep a record of his ideas about "Art and Reality" clearly establish the centrality of his quest for "the spiritual" in all of his artistic endeavors at the time. This is the key passage:

> *Art and Reality*. Art is higher than reality, and has no direct relation to reality. Between the physical sphere and the ethereal sphere there is a frontier where our senses stop functioning. Nevertheless, the ether penetrates the physical sphere and acts upon it. Thus the spiritual penetrates the real. But for our senses these are two different things—the spiritual and the material. To approach the spiritual in art, one will make as little use as possible of reality, because reality is opposed to the spiritual. Thus the use of elementary forms is logically accounted for. These forms being abstract, we find ourselves in the presence of an abstract art.

Careful attention must be paid to the way Mondrian invokes the concept of "reality" in his writings, for in a very short time it would come to signify something very different—the exact opposite, in fact—from his identification of reality, in this passage, with the material world of "our senses." This is, of course, what most of us mean by reality. As he refined his philosophy of art, however, bringing it into stricter alignment with occult doctrine, "reality" became a term wholly reserved in Mondrian's later writings for the realm of "the spiritual." But this terminological revision does not reflect any change in the essential direction of his thought about abstract art. Fundamental to its creation, in his case, was a steadfast metaphysical belief in the division that separated "the spiritual and the material," and, as an artistic corollary to this, a further belief—which he was not yet ready to act upon to the fullest degree—in "the use of elementary forms" as the most expeditious means of achieving "the spiritual" in art.

We cannot know what immediate course Mondrian's painting—as distinct from his ideas about painting—would have followed if the war had not disrupted his artistic pursuits in the summer of 1914. Summoned to his father's bedside in July of that fateful year, he was not expecting this duty visit to his family to amount to anything more than a brief interlude. As it happened, of course, he soon found himself trapped in the Netherlands for the duration of the war. As the country was neutral in the war, Mondrian was never in any danger from the military operations that were devastating other parts of Europe. Yet he felt painfully cut off from the important work he had started. Separated from his paintings, which had been left behind in Paris, and from the milieu in which they had been produced, Mondrian lost some of his artistic momentum. Nevertheless, in this period of enforced repatriation he devoted a great deal of thought to formulating his future artistic program.

In this pursuit he soon discovered that he was by no means as isolated in his new artistic and philosophical outlook as he had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

believed himself to be. "The war," writes the Dutch historian H. L. C. Jaffé, "had brought many Dutch artists who had been working abroad, back to their native country and these came back to the Netherlands charged with the results of their studies and full of new and promising ideas. In the Netherlands they found an atmosphere of spiritual tension, generated by the fact of the country's being a neutral enclave, an oasis in a continent at war." It was thus in the war years that Mondrian came to know, among others, the painters Theo van Doesburg and Bart van der Leck, the architects J. J. P. Oud and Robert van't Hoff, the designers Vilmos Huszar and Gerrit Rietveld, and the Belgian sculptor Georges Vantongerloo—the artists who, with Mondrian, founded in 1917 the avant-garde movement called De Stijl (the Style). This was to have an immense influence not only on the future of abstract art throughout the Western world but also on modern architecture and design and on the aesthetic, social, and pedagogical theories that supported them.

De Stijl was, from the outset, something more than an art movement. It was a social and cultural program, based on a visionary amalgam of idealist aesthetics, industrial mechanics, and utopian politics. Its ambition was to redesign the world by imposing straight lines, primary colors, and geometric form—and thus an ideal of impersonal order and rationality—upon the production of every man-made object essential to the modern human environment. Rejecting tradition, it envisioned the rebirth of the world as a kind of technological Eden from which all trace of individualism and the conflicts it generates would be permanently banished. Its goal was to liberate European culture from the "archaistic confusion" of its past in order to create an entirely new and completely harmonious civilization.

In this ambition, notwithstanding its rationalist claims, a belief in the occult was to play an important role. In 1915, the Dutch writer M. H. J. Schoenmaekers published a treatise called *The New Image of the World*, described by its author as a work of "positive mysticism." This and a subsequent volume, *Plastic Mathematics* (1916), exerted a crucial influence on Mondrian and the other founders of De Stijl. According to Jaffé, "Both Mondrian and Schoenmaekers lived, at the time, in Laren and . . . saw each other frequently and had long and animated discussions." Schoenmaekers's ideas were directly incorporated into the De Stijl program, from 1917 onward, as well as into Mondrian's later theoretical writings. The very term that Mondrian adopted for the geometrical abstractions of his later years —Neo-Plasticism—was borrowed from Schoenmaekers's wartime writings.

Schoenmaekers was a Neo-Platonist in quest of a reality more absolute than any that could be discerned in the natural world without the aid of mystical illumination. Nature, from the perspective of this "positive mysticism," was looked upon as a mystery to be scrutinized and penetrated—a view that was more or less in accord with theosophical doctrine, and that also bore a distinct resemblance to the Symbolist philosophy of Mallarmé. Truth was defined as the reduction of "the relativity of natural facts to the absolute, in order to recover the absolute in natural facts." What was especially important in this theory was that art, if sufficiently awakened to its mystical role, was accorded a central place in the metaphysical process. "In art," Schoenmaekers wrote, mysticism "creates what we call, in the strictest sense, 'style.'" Style in art is characterized as "the general in spite of the particular" and the means by which "art is integrated in general cultural life." Thus the joint task of the artist and the mystic is "to penetrate nature in such a way that the inner construction of reality is revealed to us."

It was not only for its philosophical affirmation of the mystical view of "reality," moreover, nor for the role it envisioned for art in divining its "inner construction," that Schoenmaekers's theories were important for Mondrian in his thinking about abstrac-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion. Schoenmaekers also specified the nature of the forms (rectilinear structures of the horizontal and the vertical) and the colors (the primaries: red, yellow, and blue) to be used in this artistic quest for the absolute, and then elaborated upon their cosmic significance. "This new plastic expression," Schoenmaekers wrote in *The New Image of the World*, "is of this world. . . . But it is a new earthiness, an earthly heaven." And an "earthly heaven," or some artistic analogue thereof, was indeed what the artists of the De Stijl group, Mondrian most conspicuously, were determined to create in their abstract art.

It must not be supposed, however, that Schoenmaekers's ideas triggered an abrupt or immediate break in Mondrian's pictorial practice. The purely geometrical, or Neo-Plasticist, abstractions with which Mondrian came ultimately to be identified, were never painted according to a theoretical formula, and there was certainly no sudden conversion to the purely geometrical as the result of his response to Schoenmaekers's philosophy. On the contrary, Mondrian seemed at first somewhat daunted by the vision of an art that might jettison all the variations in tone and contour that had remained a staple of his painting even when he abandoned conventional representation in the most highly developed of his "Cubist" abstractions. In later years, with his painting confidently entrenched in Neo-Plasticist principles, he might dismiss such residual signs of painterly tradition as a throwback to "Impressionism" or even naturalism; but during this difficult period of transition to a more absolute mode of abstraction, when every mark on the canvas was an exploration of the unknown, Mondrian nonetheless held fast to such vestiges of tradition even as he was inching his way toward a conception of painting that would finally do without them.

Thus, the pictorial means traditionally associated with the depiction of observable objects and the space they occupy—shifts of tone and color value, and the variations in drawing that serve to hold them in place—survived a while longer in Mondrian's painting even when their representational function had already been forfeited. Clearly it was not an easy matter for a painter of Mondrian's background and experience, even at this relatively advanced stage of his development, to bid an irrevocable farewell to such a fundamental pictorial practice. The depth of the perturbation caused by this radical option may be inferred from the fact that only one painting by the artist survives from the year 1916. This was the crucial period in which Mondrian was struggling to reconcile the demands of his art with the appeal of Schoenmaekers's ideas. The abstraction that he produced that year —*Composition: 1916*, now in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum—is at once a summation of the "old" painting and a partial preview of the new. Its forms are predominantly rectilinear but still soft-edged, "open," and irregular. Its black lines hold firmly to right-angled verticals and horizontals, but at the side edges of the painting they shade off into veiled grays. Its colors —blues and blueish grays, pinks and grayish pinks, yellowish ochres that in places turn brown—are cousin to the primaries, but remain equivocal, impure, and atmospheric. There is no discernible subject in *Composition: 1916*, but for anyone who knows the *Pier and Ocean* drawings by Mondrian that preceded it there is an unmistakable visual echo, or memory, in its fragmented grid structure. This is painting with a pronounced appetite for an absolute it does not yet command the means of realizing.

The breakthrough came the very next year. "For the moment at least," Mondrian wrote to a friend in September 1917, "my long search is over." While he had produced little new painting during the previous year, he had devoted much time and thought to the writing of a treatise of his own—"The New Plastic in Painting"—which Van Doesburg began serializing in the inaugural issues of *De Stijl*, the magazine founded in 1917 to launch the new movement. At the same time, Mondrian painted his first geometrical

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

abstractions—the series of pictures entitled *Compositions in Color* or *Compositions with Color Planes*. These "flat" pictorial compositions of rectangles in primary colors on a gray ground closed the door on the kind of illusionistic space—the space of representation—that the artist had been struggling to transcend since his first encounter with Cubism six years earlier. In 1917, Mondrian had at last brought both the theory and the practice of pure abstraction into a satisfactory alignment.

"The New Plastic in Painting" owed a good deal to Schoenmaekers's mystical philosophy, of course, but it was more directly addressed to the problems of painting. It was at once a manifesto for a new pictorial aesthetic—an aesthetic of pure abstraction—and a restatement of the occult, antimaterialist doctrines that supported its creation. "The new plastic," Mondrian wrote in the introduction to this historic treatise, "cannot be cloaked in what is characteristic of the particular, natural form and color, but must be expressed by the abstraction of form and color—by means of the straight line and determinate primary color." What is remarkable about "The New Plastic in Painting" is not only its triumphal affirmation of pure abstraction as an aesthetic "absolute"—a word that was repeatedly sounded throughout the manifesto—but the anxious attention that is lavished on the need to emancipate painting from the thralldom of what is variously called "nature's appearance," "naturalistic representation," "naturalistic form," "naturalistic color," and so on. Nature haunts the pages of "The New Plastic in Painting" like a specter that can be neither exorcised nor appeased. It can only be resisted by an act of transcendent artistic conscience that makes the pursuit of the "universal" a quest so absolute that all the contingencies of nature are stripped of their importance.

Implicit in this view of what Mondrian also called "the style of the future" was an idea of evolution—the evolution of art in the service of the evolution of spirit—akin to the theosophical doctrines of Madame Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner. According to this conception of evolution, mankind had once "lived in harmony with nature's rhythm." With the development of human consciousness, however, "there automatically ensued a disharmony between man and nature." It was thus to be the function of the new abstraction, or what Mondrian sometimes called "abstract-real painting," to give us "the image of this regained harmony." This was to be achieved, Mondrian avowed, by the creation of a pictorial composition "more mathematical than naturalistic," an art of "pure relationships" that eschewed "all that was capricious" in nature in order to achieve "*the most constant, the most determinate plastic expression of equilibrated relationship*—composition in rectangular planes." (The emphasis is Mondrian's.) Hence the *Compositions with Color Planes* that set him on his new course in 1917.

"The New Plastic in Painting" concludes by celebrating the emergence of "a purer and purer mode of expression in art" as a triumph of the modern era, and Mondrian was himself to live by this artistic faith for the rest of his life and make it a source of inspiration for others. All the same, an existential uncertainty about the role of nature—in art and in life—remained a vexing issue for Mondrian, and his philosophy of abstraction cannot be fully comprehended in isolation from it. Toward the end of "The New Plastic in Painting," his ruminations on nature suddenly take the form of an arcane discussion of the male and female principles transposed to the realm of mystical archetypes. Identifying nature with the female principle and spirit with the male, he concludes that "The female and male elements, nature and spirit, then find their *pure expression, true unity, only in the abstract*." (Again, the emphasis is Mondrian's.) This is clearly the sheerest mysticism, and more the expression of a lingering anxiety about nature than a resolution of the problem it posed for a sensibility nurtured on the occult. Yet it was upon such an uneasy mystical foundation that Mondrian's absolutist aesthetic of abstraction finally came to rest.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In this amalgam of mysticism, anxiety, abstraction, and a search for the absolute, we are reminded, as we often are with Mondrian, of Mallarmé—especially of that passage in Mallarmé's prose in which the poet speaks so poignantly of "isolating oneself, disdainfully, in the serenity of abstraction." "Serenity appears as a quality both of the effect of the finished work," wrote one of Mallarmé's commentators, D. J. Mossop, "and of the artist's feelings during the act of composition. It is, in turn, inseparable from the idea of harmony. The poet achieves harmony and serenity in himself and in his work by withdrawing from too active a participation in the passions of his theme so as to abstract a perfect order from the disorder common to the impressions made by normal experience and the feelings of lyrical inspiration."

Such was Mondrian's outlook on art and life, too, as he finally achieved "the serenity of abstraction" and embarked upon the work that would shape the course of abstract art for decades to come.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jane Austen for the Nineties

by Brooke Allen

"Jane Austen: A Woman for the '90s," says the Everyman's Library ad in *Publishers Weekly*. "She's sensible, she's persuasive, she's proud. And she's the hottest film property since E. M. Forster."

Nineteen ninety-five is a bumper year for Austenites. A film of *Sense and Sensibility*, starring Emma Thompson, is slated to appear this autumn. The BBC is putting out a new version of *Pride and Prejudice* and has collaborated with Sony in an ungraceful adaptation of *Persuasion* (in their attempts to purify the movie of Hollywood sheen and give it an air of naturalism, the producers of *Persuasion* have too zealously ripped away the romantic gauze: the distressing results are an unappealing Anne Elliot, a pockmarked Captain Wentworth, a greasy-locked Benwick, and a slovenly-looking Lady Russell). And, in the season's most offbeat film adaptation, Austen's meddling heroine Emma Woodhouse has been charmingly resurrected as a dizzy Beverly Hills babe in the new teenage movie *Clueless*.

It is heartening to see that the works of Jane Austen live on in the mainstream of our culture. She is indeed a woman for the Nineties and for every decade. Though her books are almost two hundred years old, they gleam with an immediate freshness that no previous or subsequent novelist has quite achieved. They are entirely free, for example, of the lumbering contrivances and verbosity of her major predecessors, Fielding and Richardson; the novels of her successful contemporaries, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and even Walter Scott, have badly withered in the intervening centuries; her immediate heirs the Brontës, for all their qualities, lack her universal and timeless appeal. The great Dickens must finally be reckoned an inferior artist to Austen, because while she addressed her readers as intellectual equals, he too often did so in the spirit of a conjuror manipulating an audience. And the heavy-hitting moderns like James, Woolf, and Joyce were disproportionately concerned with aesthetic problems over moral ones. Shortly before his death Anthony Burgess stated his opinion, arrived at after a lifetime of studying Joyce, that "probably the novel is a middlebrow form and both Joyce and Woolf were on the wrong track." If he is right, then this middlebrow form has produced its most perfect practitioner in Jane Austen, and, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the greatest expression of sheer joyfulness in our language.

It is easy to love Austen, and easy to love her blindly. E. M. Forster ridiculed the Austen-idolator in a 1925 essay:

> I am a Jane Austenite, and therefore slightly imbecile about Jane Austen. My fatuous expression and airs of personal immunity—how ill they set on the face, say, of a Stevensonian! But Jane Austen is so different. She is my favourite author! I read and re-read, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> mouth open and the mind closed. Shut up in measureless content, I greet her by the name of most kind hostess, while criticism slumbers. The Jane Austenite possesses little of the brightness he ascribes so freely to his idol. Like all regular churchgoers, he scarcely notices what is being said.

Austen fans perusing their idol's masterpieces, Forster wrote, have a tendency to fall into a "primal stupor." There is a great deal of truth in this little squib. Austen's accessibility, her wit and her jokes, the reader's confidence that there will be happy endings for all his or her favorite characters, has led to a widespread perception of Austen as a cozy novelist whose role is to provide a comforting illusion that all's right with the world. This incomplete assessment has become so widely accepted that in an article in *The Times Literary Supplement* earlier this year Joyce Carol Oates made the bizarre statement that in Jane Austen's novels

> there is no war, no harm, no sin, scarcely any blame, nor any blemish on a heroine's complexion. . . . If there are complications, they will be resolved; if there are misunderstandings, they will be cleared up. People make mistakes, but never fatally. Irony is not a principle of discourse. Forgiveness, compassion, generosity, warmth; lovingly detailed interiors, clothes, social mannerisms, the habits of "eccentric" characters; plots that might be disastrous, but are not.

Can Ms. Oates and I be reading the same novelist? No sin? What about Maria Rushworth, Henry Crawford, Willoughby, Wickham, Mrs. Norris? On a finer, more ambiguous level, what about Mr. Bennet, Sir Thomas Bertram, Frank Churchill, Mrs. Dashwood, Mr. Price? Even some of Austen's ostensible heroes are not without sin: what reader not caught in the Austenite's "primal stupor" can hold Edmund Bertram or Edward Ferrars to be spotless or even wholly deserving young men?

As for blemishes on the complexion, who can fail to be moved by Anne Elliot's faded bloom? And Jane Austen is of all her contemporaries the very least inclined to give us lovingly detailed interiors or descriptions of dress. With the possible exceptions of Northanger Abbey and Mr. Darcy's Pemberley, very few particulars of interior decoration are offered, and how many readers can say with certainty whether their favorite heroine is dark or fair, or even what color Elizabeth Bennet's fine eyes might be? Gardens and exteriors are described in rather more detail than are interiors, but this is always for the purpose of indicating subtle points of character in the house's owner or its visitor (as with Darcy and Elizabeth at Pemberley, or the various members of the Bertram family at Sotherton Court) and not for description's own sake. Far from lavishing her books with minutiae, Austen streamlined them in a manner that was almost revolutionary for her day, and she was proud of her ruthless cutting: "I have lopt & cropt so successfully," she said of *Pride and Prejudice*, "that I imagine it must be rather shorter than [*Sense and Sensibility*] altogether," and it is surely the verbal constraint, the tight focus upon character and motivation, that keep her novels living and breathing in a world whose exterior aspect is changed almost beyond recognition.

Oates's thoughtless assertion that Austen's characters make no fatal mistakes fails to take into account the fact that Austen was a highly religious woman with a stoic cast of mind. Maria Rushworth, Henry and Mary Crawford, John Willoughby are the possessors of souls, souls which are eventually lost through the characters' own actions. Willoughby's own eloquent words to Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* show him to be fully aware of the evil in his decision to marry a rich woman rather than the portionless Marianne, for whom he had come to feel something approaching love: "To avoid a comparative poverty, which her affection and her society would have deprived of all its horrors, I have, by raising myself to affluence, lost everything that could make it a blessing." Even a paragon of good intentions like *Pride and Prejudice*'s

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mr. Bingley is capable through sheer passivity of doing irreparable damage: as Elizabeth points out, "without scheming to do wrong, or make others unhappy, there may be error, and there may be misery. Thoughtlessness, want of attention to other people's feelings, and want of resolution, will do the business." In Austen's novels mistakes, fatal mistakes, are frequently made. It is the real possibility of disaster that gives *Emma* and *Persuasion*, for example, their power; things could so easily have turned out differently, tragically. Austen's biographer Park Honan wrote that she viewed life "as a struggle never won." Even her Cinderella endings imply a lifetime of sustained moral effort beyond the longed-for marriages.

The fate of Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* is an example of just how ambiguous Austen could make her characters' choices, how carefully she asked her readers to consider and judge. Charlotte, hitherto a sensible young woman, decides to accept the ridiculous Mr. Collins's offer of marriage and defends herself with a reasoned, though chilling, display of what her contemporaries called Sense. We are invited to consider Charlotte's decision in the light of her possibilities and even, perhaps, to condone it; Charlotte is not made an object of judgment by the author. Yet to what extent does Austen actually sympathize with Charlotte? Is Charlotte in fact guilty of an unforgivable sin against nature and truth? In 1814 Austen herself was urging her own niece, Fanny Knight, not to think of accepting her suitor "unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection."

Thus Anne Elliot's final speech to Captain Wentworth, which has startled so many readers, should by no means be taken as Austen's final judgment on the issue of persuasion. "I must believe that I was right," Anne says, "much as I suffered for it, that I was perfectly right in being guided. . . . I was right in submitting to [Lady Russell], and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up"—quite a contrast with Austen's own advice to Fanny: "Your affection gives me the greatest pleasure, but indeed you must not let anything depend on my opinion. Your own feelings & none but your own, should determine such an important point." How reliable in fact is Anne as a mouthpiece for the moralizing author? It is such tantalizing ambiguities that keep Austen's novels alive for every generation.

Oates's weirdest opinion on Austen is her assertion that "irony is not a principle of discourse." On the contrary, irony is probably the most consistent and pervasive principle of discourse in Austen's work. For the most part it is an irony that delicately adheres to the story and the characters, so much a part of the structure that it melts into its background, requiring a certain quickness of response from the reader. (To her sister she joked: "I do not write for such dull Elves/ As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves.") It is not the heavily constructed irony of situation of the Conrad or Hardy type; Austen's meanings, her moral dichotomies, tend to be elusive. By the end of *Sense and Sensibility* we realize that the two sisters are not opposites, but complementary—at times Marianne displays more sense than Elinor, Elinor more sensibility than Marianne. Elizabeth Bennet may be prejudiced, but she is also far more perceptive than most of the society around her. Darcy is proud, yet at the same time curiously humble.

It is when Jane Austen lets her irony become too obvious—when she demands the reader's concurrence without earning it, explicitly instructing her readers as to how they ought to think—that she occasionally fails. In the very first chapter of *Mansfield Park* the omniscient narrator reveals as much about the characters of Sir Thomas, Lady Bertram, and Mrs. Norris as we learn in the entire novel: they are described, summed up, and dismissed, and from that moment they can offer no further surprises. Maria and Julia Bertram, too, on whose be-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

havior so much of the psychological drama of the novel is to depend, are served up on a platter very early in the story. "Their vanity was in such good order," the narrator states, "that they seemed to be quite free from it, and gave themselves no airs."

How different, and how much less effective than the slow unfolding, the almost imperceptible growth of a character like Darcy's, or Elizabeth's, or Emma's. The reader loves them because his susceptibilities are beguiled and his good judgment is appealed to—but Austen *tells* us to love Fanny, and in spite of all the author's obvious partiality, many readers are not convinced. In the same manner Henry Crawford is said by the narrator, again and again, to be charming. *Northanger Abbey*'s Henry Tilney, on the other hand, has no need for his author's recommendations: his own conversation demonstrates his real charm beyond a doubt.

Films are not the only item on the Jane Austenite's agenda. Nineteen ninety-five has also seen a new edition of Austen's letters, edited by Deirdre Le Faye.[1] This is the third edition of the complete letters, following up the work of the great Austen editor R. W. Chapman, who originally published the letters in 1932 and twenty years later revised them in a second edition containing five new letters. Several new fragments have turned up since then, and additional family manuscripts have also been made available. Accordingly a number of the letters have changed places in the sequence, and Le Faye has effected some textual alterations.

The new edition, with its extensive notes on matters like provenance, watermarks, and postmarks, is of interest to scholars and is the most comprehensive edition we have —yet the general reader would probably do better to get his hands on a copy of Penelope Hughes-Hallett's 1990 selection, which is lavishly illustrated and introduces each letter with a generous measure of background material. The format favored by both Chapman and Le Faye is extremely difficult for any reader who does not already know quite a lot about Jane Austen and her large extended family and circle of friends: there are endnotes rather than footnotes, so that the reader must turn to the rear of the book several times per page in order to find out to whom the often cryptic comments refer, and while these notes are heavy on recondite editorial information, they contain very little about the personalities Jane Austen is writing about, which will naturally be the principal point of interest for most readers. These are gossipy letters, and need gossipy footnotes, which Le Faye, a serious scholar, is not in the business of supplying.

Even by an Austen-idolator it must be admitted that Jane Austen was not one of the world's great letter-writers. One cannot criticize her for not addressing posterity—indeed, her modest assessment of her own claim to literary immortality is one of her more attractive qualities; it never occurred to her that anyone other than the recipients might read her gossip and household chat. Nevertheless the mundanity of her usual subject matter is not encouraging, and although, as she said, she herself found the purchase of a sponge-cake interesting and she might well be able to make it interesting in a novel, she seldom troubles to do so in her correspondence. Here is a typical excerpt:

> I wonder whether the Ink bottle has been filled.—Does Butcher's meat keep up at the same price? & is not Bread lower than 2/6.—Mary's blue gown!—My Mother must be in agonies.—I have a great mind to have *my* blue gown dyed some time or other—I proposed it once to you & you made some objection, I forget what.—It is the fashion of flounces that gives it particular Expediency.—Mrs & Miss Wildman have just been here. Miss is very plain.

And so on, and so on. There is a great deal of talk about clothes and food, clothes pre-

1 *Jane Austen's Letters*, edited by Deirdre Le Faye; Oxford University Press, 643 pages, $49.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dominating in the author's early years, food in the later ones.

The fact is that Jane Austen led an uneventful life. She was the seventh child in her family, which consisted of six sons (James, a clergyman; Francis and Charles, both naval officers; Edward Austen Knight, who was adopted by a rich couple who made him their heir; Henry, the most colorful of the siblings, who pursued a number of careers; George, who was an epileptic and deaf-mute and lived apart from the family) and two daughters, Cassandra and Jane. The Austens were a harmonious family and remained close to one another throughout their lives. Neither of the two girls married; they lived with their parents in the village of Steventon, where their father was rector, until 1801 when Jane was twenty-five years old, then moved to Bath when Mr. Austen retired. Upon his death in 1805 the mother and two sisters settled in the Hampshire village of Chawton, on the estate of Jane's brother Edward Knight. Jane died at the age of forty-one of Addison's disease, which was at that time incurable.

Jane Austen was shy about her writing, and tried to keep the fact of her authorship a secret. Her books were published with "By a Lady" in place of the author's name on the title page. Eventually the well-meaning boasts of her proud brothers and friends blew her cover; by 1813 she was writing that "the Secret has spread so far as to be scarcely the Shadow of a secret now . . . I beleive [sic] whenever the 3rd appears, I shall not even attempt to tell Lies about it.—I shall rather try to make all the Money than all the Mystery I can of it."

In the last three or four years of her life she achieved a modest degree of celebrity, even receiving an invitation to the Prince Regent's Carlton House and a request from the Regent that she dedicate *Emma* to him (she felt it was an offer she could not refuse, though she had always held him in contempt as a rake and a profligate). Though Austen's works never sold on the scale of Maria Edgeworth's or Fanny Burney's, both *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* did well (*Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were not published until after Austen's death), and *Pride and Prejudice*, the most popular of her books during her lifetime, went into a third edition. She earned a grand total of £685 during her writing life—not a fortune, even by the standards of the day, and she complained that "People are more ready to borrow & praise, than to buy—which I cannot wonder at;—but tho' I like praise as well as anybody, I like what Edward calls *Pewter* too."

Austen took pride in her abilities, and knew when she had done well (of Elizabeth Bennet she wrote, "I must confess that *I* think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, & how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least, I do not know"); she enjoyed reading her works in progress to her family; but writing was strictly a private activity for her, and the face she presented to the world was not that of an authoress but of a rural gentlewoman. To everyone, including her family, she played down her writing as secondary in importance to her role within the household and the community. Her letters, accordingly, are much richer in domestic detail than in insights into her creative life. A reader of the correspondence who happened to be unacquainted with her novels would think her to have been a sharp, acidly amusing woman but hardly one of the immortals.

Not that the letters that survive would present her much scope for aesthetic or philosophical speculation; a few were written to her young nieces Anna and Fanny, but the vast majority were short, newsy bulletins to Cassandra during one or the other sister's absences from home, missives that Le Faye likens to telephone calls. It should be said that it is high time readers stopped maligning Cassandra Austen for destroying some of her sister's letters (mostly, it turns out, ones that contained references to ill-health or hurtful comments

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that might have wounded the feelings of Jane Austen's survivors). Cassandra in fact deserves posterity's gratitude for preserving the vast majority of the letters her sister sent her; none of Austen's other correspondents did. The six Austen brothers and their parents kept none of Jane's letters, her nieces only a few.

Cassandra merits praise not only for retaining her sister's correspondence but, even more importantly, for taking on the lion's share of the household work, leaving Jane enough free time in which to write—a boon of which Jane must have been very sensible. In the last year of her life she wrote of a fellow-authoress, "how good Mrs West cd have written such Books & collected so many hard words, with all her family cares, is . . . a matter of astonishment! Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb."

Much has been made of the fact that in neither her novels nor her letters did Jane Austen discuss the really momentous events that were being played out upon the world stage during her lifetime. In actuality Austen was alert to political events and also to the intellectual currents of her age, one in which ideas, as the historian J. Christopher Herold has written, "were in marvelous disorder, in a veritable orgy of cross-fertilization. . . . [T]hings of the mind mixed freely for a brief moment, heedless of former labels and classifications, dressed up in a riot of fantastic new fashions." Austen was the contemporary of Napoleon, Beethoven, Constable, Wordsworth, Turner, Schiller, Blake, and Byron; she was an avid reader of poetry, particularly her favorites, Crabbe and Cowper; she followed with interest the wild roller-coaster of contemporary politics.

But her genius stood peculiarly apart from the genius of her age. In the period of nascent romanticism she remained wedded to a Johnsonian ideal of common sense; while her contemporaries courted the spark of divine madness, she was and is perhaps the sanest writer in the language. She was a faithful communicant of the Church of England and an unswerving Tory during the ascendance of liberals and reformers. The few political reflections to which she makes her correspondents privy seem remarkably commonplace for a woman capable of such subtle reasoning in the area of human relations: in 1814, during the war with America, she wrote to a friend, "If we *are* to be ruined, it cannot be helped—but I place my hope of better things on a claim to the protection of Heaven, as a Religious Nation, a Nation in spite of much Evil improving in Religion, which I cannot believe the Americans to possess"—sentiments, and prose, which point ahead to those of Queen Victoria.

Austen's recoil from serious matters was a marked characteristic. Even her own personal crises—the defection of Tom Lefroy, a young man she was growing to love, the death of Cassandra's fiance, the death of another young man that the family believed Jane would marry, Jane's acceptance, then almost immediate rejection, of a friend's proposal—are not touched on in these letters. Austen makes light, for example, of the great dangers that threatened her two sailor brothers in the English navy's struggle against Napoleonic France; she much preferred to crack jokes rather than discuss painful feelings with any degree of *gravitas*.

It is interesting to observe the way in which the distrust of emotional display shown in her letters became a major theme in her novels, for not just *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* but all of Austen's fiction, from the farcical *Love and Freindship* [sic] which she wrote at the age of fourteen for the amusement of her family, right through *Persuasion*, can be seen as a rebuttal of the contemporary convention of sensibility whereby society measures intensity of emotion, and moral worth itself, by visible demonstrations of feeling. Many of Austen's finest characters—Darcy, Fanny Price, Elinor Dashwood, Anne Elliot, Jane Fairfax, Mr. Knightley, Jane Bennet—struggle not to express but to hide their emotions, and Austen often indicates, by

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

contrast, that emotional transparency springs from an essential vulgarity and light-mindedness, as the easy confidences of Harriet Smith, Lydia Bennet, Wickham, Lucy Steele, Mary Crawford, and even Edmund Bertram show.

In her letters Austen's dislike of sentiment could reveal a hardness that has repelled many readers. As a clever young woman of twenty-two she wrote to Cassandra, "Mrs Hall of Sherbourn was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, oweing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband"—a crack that can seem either funny or appalling, depending on the reader and his mood. Recounting a ball two years later, Austen ran through her fellow-revellers:

> There were very few Beauties, & such as there were, were not very handsome. Miss Iremonger did not look well & Mrs Blount was the only one much admired. She appeared exactly as she did in September, with the same broad face, diamond bandeau, white shoes, pink husband, & fat neck. . . . Miss Debary, Susan & Sally all in black, but without any Statues, made their appearance, & I was as civil to them as their bad breath would allow me.

Such brittle, bitchy humor amuses for a while but palls quickly without the complementary virtues (always present in the novels) of balance, fairness, and even—yes—sentiment, or at any rate respect for the genuine feelings that underlie sentimental demonstrations. As a fictional character even fat Mrs. Musgrove is allowed her measure of real grief for her worthless son, but all too often Austen, at least in confidence to her sister, denies that right to the actual people around her.

Yet as Austen matured and aged she gained markedly in compassion, and in any case the cruel jokes between the sisters were very much a private affair; by her family and friends Jane Austen was overwhelmingly remembered as a kind woman. Her elder brother Francis described her as "cheerful and not easily irritated, and tho' rather reserved with strangers so as to have been accused by some of haughtiness of manner, yet in the company of those she loved the native benevolence of her heart and kindliness of her disposition were forcibly displayed." After Jane's death Cassandra mourned her as "the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow."

It is this essential kindness, allied with the famous wit, that made Jane Austen the artist she was. "Nobody ever feels or acts, suffers or enjoys, as one expects!" she exclaims in 1813, a few months later writing, "After having much praised or much blamed anybody, one is generally sensible of something just the reverse soon afterwards"—the very foundation of her gift for irony and surprise. A trip to two London museums inspires "some amusement at each, tho' my preference for Men & Women, always inclines me to attend more to the company than the sight."

This says everything about Austen's particular outlook: well-read and cultured though she may have been, hers was a mind to which every pleasure of the intellect and spirit—art, literature, even nature—was subordinated to her essential interest, the vagaries of the human animal. Like Barbara Pym, a novelist often compared with Austen, she uses cultural references purely in order to illuminate her characters. The fatuity of Sir Edward, in Austen's fragment *The Watsons*, is fatally exposed by his passion for Robert Burns: "His soul was the altar in which lovely woman sat enshrined," gushes the foolish baronet, "his spirit truly breathed the immortal incense which is her due." And just as Pym has her characters either rhapsodize or yawn over a visit to Keats's Hampstead house in *The Sweet Dove Died*, Austen has Captain Benwick and Anne Elliot speak of Scott and Byron not in order to weave the works of the poets into her own thematic pattern but to enrich her characterization of Anne and poke gentle fun at Benwick:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> . . . having talked of poetry, the richness of the present age, and gone through a brief comparison of opinion as to the first-rate poets, trying to ascertain whether *Marmion* or *The Lady of the Lake* were to be preferred, and how ranked the *Giaour* and *The Bridge of Abydos*; and, moreover, how the *Giaour* was to be pronounced, he shewed himself so intimately acquainted with all the tenderest songs of the one poet, and all the impassioned descriptions of hopeless agony of the other . . . that she ventured to hope he did not always read only poetry; and to say, that she thought it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly.

In spite of the tedium of much of the correspondence, it does give us some marvelous insights into the mind of a woman who was a great artist without, perhaps, being a great thinker. Her advice to her young niece Anna, an aspiring authoress, is valuable in that it contains all we possess of Austen's ideas on fiction-writing; in other letters we catch glimpses of the distinctive humor that marks her own work (one can detect the author of *Northanger Abbey* in Austen's laughter at Fanny Knight's love life: "Your trying to excite your own feelings by a visit to his room amused me excessively.—The dirty Shaving Rag was exquisite!—Such a circumstance ought to be in print"). And there are gems, such as the little correspondence between Austen and the Rev. James Stanier-Clarke, the Regent's Librarian and an ardent Austen fan. Clarke, a delicious mixture of obsequiousness and innocence, showers Austen with his ideas on potential subjects for her genius: perhaps a novel about an English clergyman "Fond of, & entirely engaged in Literature —no man's Enemy but his own," or "a Historical Romance illustrative of the History of the august house of Cobourg." Austen's graceful refusals are models of tact. "I could no more write a Romance than an Epic Poem. . . . No—I must keep to my own style & go on in my own Way; And though I may never succeed in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other."

And occasionally there are moments of pure delight—as when Jane Austen accompanied her brother Henry to a picture gallery in London and caught a glimpse there of one of her own characters:

> It is not thought a very good collection, but I was very well pleased—particularly . . . with a small portrait of Mrs Bingley, excessively like her. I went in hopes of seeing one of her Sister, but there was no Mrs Darcy. . . . Mrs Bingley's is exactly herself, size, shaped face, features & sweetness; there never was a greater likeness. She is dressed in a white gown, with green ornaments, which convinces me of what I had always supposed, that green was a favourite colour with her. I dare say Mrs D. will be in Yellow.

But Elizabeth Darcy was to remain elusive even after Jane and Henry visited two more exhibitions. "There was nothing like Mrs D. at either," she wrote. "I can only imagine that Mr D. prizes any Picture of her too much to like that it should be exposed to the public eye.—I can imagine he wd have that sort of feeling—that mixture of Love, Pride, & Delicacy."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Brancusi in Paris

by Karen Wilkin

"Constantin Brancusi: 1876–1957," the exhibition that filled the top floor of the Centre Georges Pompidou this spring and summer, was eagerly awaited.[1] For more than twenty-five years, there had been no major show of this pioneer modernist's sculpture anywhere, a remarkable enough statistic given Brancusi's fame, importance, and near cult status among his admirers. What is more surprising, there had never before been a retrospective of his work in France, even though he lived there for more than half a century and bequeathed the contents of his Montparnasse studio to his adopted nation after he died. All spring, the news from Paris was of a really first-rate, really beautiful exhibition; one notoriously hard-to-please New York critic described it as the best show of twentieth-century sculpture he had ever seen in a long career. Crowds were apparently modest at first, but by peak tourist season, lines to buy tickets snaked across the lobby of the Beaubourg and out the door. Enormous posters everywhere in Paris made a casually poised *Sleeping Muse*—a gleaming bronze egg with schematic features—almost as familiar as the Michelin man.

Among Parisian intellectuals, however, especially among the artists, the exhibition was highly controversial. Along with the arguments about the choice of works that are inevitable with any large show, there were protestations that the exhibition was too large and too repetitious. The truly serious complained that insufficient weight was given to the late pieces and lamented the violations of strict chronology in the sequence. The most passionate discussions were rarely about Brancusi's work per se but about the installation, variously faulted for being too theatrical and for making it difficult to see individual pieces. One painter friend denounced the curators for "subverting the experience of the sacred object." Interestingly enough, all of these diverging points of view are defensible. While I am not ready to say that the Brancusi retrospective was *the* best show of twentieth-century sculpture that I've ever seen, it certainly was one of the most convincing, as well as one of the most beautiful, in a long time. But the Parisians have a point—several points, in fact.

It's perfectly true, for example, that the show *was* large and repetitious, but repetition was an important part of Brancusi's practice; he returned over and over again to certain motifs, changing them in response

1 "Constantin Brancusi" was on view at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, from April 14 through August 21, 1995. It will be seen, in a slightly different version, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art from October 8 through December 31, 1995. A catalogue of the Philadelphia show, with essays by Ann Temkin, Margit Rowell, and Friedrich Teja Bach, will be published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the MIT Press (408 pages, $55; $35 paper).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to variations in material, often refining and simplifying them, sometimes hardening and stylizing them. The exhibition, a lavish accumulation of 103 sculptures, 38 drawings, and 55 photographs by Brancusi himself, allowed you to track his evolution, to watch as the ambitious young man who trekked, mostly on foot, from Romania to Paris, turned into a modern master, a widely traveled, celebrated figure with a devoted circle of collectors and admirers. The full range of his work was amply displayed, beginning with early sculptures made soon after his arrival in Paris in 1904, a group of essentially naturalistic, little-known pieces borrowed from Romanian museums. At the heart of the show, of course, were the deservedly famous works of the 1920s and 1930s, the allusive near-abstractions, such as the notorious *Bird in Space* (in all its permutations), that have become both icons of twentieth-century art and emblems of Brancusi's mystical quest for universal, expressive form. Obviously, the exhibition addressed the question of repetition, of working serially, by forcing you to make comparisons and allowing you—if you paid attention—to make discoveries.

Most of the sculptures were set on the extraordinary stacked bases that Brancusi designed for his works, often long after the fact and often with inclusions made at very different times; these composite structures were, in turn, grouped in a fashion inspired by the way he crowded them together—perhaps as much out of necessity as out of choice—in his spartan studio. In addition, drawings, some related to specific three-dimensional images, and, more important, original prints of Brancusi's own photographs—a significant part of his efforts—not only provided a kind of context for the sculptures but also offered fascinating evidence of how the artist looked at his own works.

There were no real surprises among the sculptures in terms of truly unknown works or works usually hidden in inaccessible collections. (Even the early works in Romanian museums were shown in New York in 1990.) Brancusi's sculptures are all both celebrated and familiar. That this is as true—perhaps even truer—for American eyes as for French ones is due to the fact that some of his principal and earliest supporters were Americans such as Agnes and Eugene Meyer, Louise and Walter Arensberg, and John Quinn, prescient enthusiasts whose lovingly assembled collections have enriched a number of important American museums. That there is a major cross section of Brancusi's work, including bases and carved furniture, in the collection of the Centre Georges Pompidou owes less to the appetite of French collectors than to the artist's disposition of what remained in his studio at the time of his death.

But not only the sculptures were familiar. Brancusi's photographs have been shown several times in the past decade. The drawings, on the whole, were more unexpected, although I found many of them to be disappointing. Unlike most sculptor's drawings, which often seem to describe potentially buildable objects, the majority of Brancusi's—or at least the majority of the ones in the Beaubourg's exhibition—were oddly disembodied, their images reduced to floating lines and patches of tone that rarely implied volume or even a trajectory through space but instead, remained detached, entirely on the surface. (There were exceptions, of course, such as the series about his studio, which included images of sculptures and bases translated from three-dimensions into two and rearranged freely in space.) Nonetheless, the cumulative effect of the retrospective was, for me, at least, to alter subtly my perceptions of an artist whose work I thought I knew thoroughly.

It was instructive, for example, to see Brancusi's early, modeled works in close proximity to those made after he definitively renounced his traditional training in sculpture to embrace direct carving. It became evident that he was never entirely an academic artist, neither when he was newly graduated from the Romanian art school where he was a prize-winning student nor

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

during the crucial year that he spent at the Ecole nationale des beaux-arts in Paris. The earliest works in the show, a group of bronze heads and busts of children, just miss being sentimental because of their fragmentation and their articulation. Rodin —for whom Brancusi worked as a "finisher" for a few months in 1907—is present in the cropping of these sculptures and in how they occupy space, but, paradoxically, so is Medardo Rosso, in their slightly blurred, veiled forms. There's also a degree of stylishness that coexists with this incipient modernism, a characteristic that would become more pronounced in the future. (Each time Brancusi returned to the image of the celebrated Mlle. Pogany, for example, the sculpture became increasingly schematic, no matter what the material, sometimes verging perilously close to a kind of *art moderne* streamlining.) In other early works, it was possible to see that some of these qualities persisted even after Brancusi began to carve directly. It was also evident that powerful new preoccupations quickly came to the fore, provoked by his discovery of a host of non-academic sources, from Ghandara heads to African carvings to Khmer deities, preoccupations that would inform his work until the end of his career: a steadily growing insistence on symmetry, geometric clarity, and simplicity of form, a progressive paring-down to the essentials of what makes a mere object an expressive *sculpture*.

For Brancusi, it was clear that this meant a gradual elimination of projections or of slender parts and an increasing concentration on self-contained, inherently volumetric forms such as heads. It's as if his ideal form were a smooth, wholly abstract oval, a cosmic egg, like the Centre Georges Pompidou's *Origin of the World* (1924), a gleaming bronze that also exists in polished marble. As Brancusi matures, his sculptures seem to draw more and more into themselves. Arms and legs are rendered with incision or low relief against the surface of the block. The clasped hands of Mlle. Pogany are gradually absorbed into the massing of the sculpture, so that head, neck, and forearms become a series of tightly pressed swelling volumes. Features become increasingly schematic and eventually disappear. Torsos are reduced to suggestive curves and intersections. Necks are eliminated so that head-like sculptures, such as the various versions of the *Sleeping Muse*, become mysterious volumes placed directly and casually on the horizontal plane, their orientation seemingly temporary and subject to change at any moment. Brancusi's quest seems to be for a perilous balance between reference and an ideal abstract geometry.

His best works pulse delicately between both extremes, as though the abstract ideal had been magically brought to life with minimal intervention. Female torsos, deliberately rendered as fragments, like antique ruins, or as ambiguous tapered ovals, still read as being intensely about the body. Sculptures that refer to young birds differ from these torsos only slightly—by a shift in orientation and a diagonal slice—yet you would never confuse one with the other. On the other hand, Brancusi's male torsos, in wood or bronze, are extremely ambiguous. They are deeply serious visual puns that turn the juncture of legs and torso into an equivocal opposition of chopped-off cylinders, perilously offset. Subtle variations in positioning and slicing animate the forms and make them breathe. There's nothing particularly male about these figures, which have sometimes even been discussed as though they were female, perhaps because of their delicacy and the tenderness with which forms touch, yet as you watch, their scale can change abruptly, so that the slender adolescent body suddenly reads as a declarative phallic abstraction. The same ambiguity obviously obtains in the various versions of *Princess X*, once barred from an exhibition as obscene. In *Princess X*, however, the phallic image is unmistakable and dominant; you have to work hard to read the sculpture as a female bust.

Perhaps most striking were the deep and inherent contradictions in Brancusi's *oeuvre* that became apparent as you went through

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the exhibition: the seemingly harmonious coexistence of timeless purism and modish stylization, of invention and repetition, of extreme elegance and of "primitivism"—a series of essential polarities arguably bound up with his double character as mystic and peasant, dreamer and artisan, that seem fundamental to his aesthetic. He prided himself, for example, on achieving the magical surfaces of his marble and bronze pieces through a long and laborious process of hand rubbing and polishing, recapitulating the way peoples who lacked sophisticated technology—who were limited to tearing and smoothing, instead of cutting and grinding—made both their works of art and their utilitarian objects; yet the result of Brancusi's repeated touching and working of his sculptures is a brilliant, nearly uninflected smoothness that has stronger visual associations with the machine-made and the impersonal than with the action of the hand. He insisted, too, that each material that he worked in elicited different kinds of forms and a different touch. At the Beaubourg, this contention was both reinforced and subverted. It was obvious that the carved wooden "African" pieces were radically unlike the polished marble sculptures and that formal changes were really provoked by changes in material. However, the slow evolution of the proportions of *Bird in Space*, the gradual elongation of the base and slimming-down of the "shaft," seemed to exist independently of whether the work was executed in marble or bronze. In some instances, too, such as the various versions of *Mlle. Pogany*, it appeared that once Brancusi had arrived at a formal solution that pleased him, the variations were only of materials or surface, not of proportion, scale, or articulation.

The exhibition at the Beaubourg brought home just how crucial these contradictions and oppositions were to Brancusi, underlining just how much his work depended upon eloquent contrasts not only between his largely abstract bases and the allusive images that he set upon them, but also between the intrinsic character of the varying materials he used to make his serial images, and between the forms, surfaces, and materials of the stacked bases themselves. Even his photographs seemed predicated on this notion of opposition. A close friend of Man Ray's, Brancusi seems to have used photography not simply as a way to document his works but also as a means of exploration and experimentation, a way of transforming his sculptures, perhaps even of transforming his way of seeing them, by changing them from three-dimensional objects to two-dimensional, disembodied images, further altered by the effects of dramatic lighting, superimpositions, and unexpected viewpoints.

The show was arranged straightforwardly, in a more or less chronological sequence of clusters of sculptures, with associated drawings and photographs kept in coherent groups, close enough for reference, but not so close as to distract. The photos, often, were placed—as text panels were—between the galleries where sculptures were exhibited, in those odd residual passages of Gae Aulenti's redesign of parts of the Beaubourg, so that they served as bridges or hinges between groupings. At the end, there was a schematic evocation of the studio, that bare, skylit space familiar from Brancusi's photographs and drawings, with its hoard of vigorously carved stools, benches, bases, chunks of stone, tools, and sculptures from all periods, of various sizes, from the intimate to the monumental, in various stages, from plaster to polished bronze. Admittedly, it was very approximate, more stage set than shrine, but still suggestive. (The reconstruction of the original studio, next door to the Beaubourg and so badly deteriorated that it hasn't been open for years, is currently being restored.)

The controversy and the displeasure of the Parisian artists and intellectuals was provoked not so much by the sequence as by the placement of the sculptures, which were grouped on broad concrete pads in the center of each gallery. The effect was handsome and, from a purely utilitarian point of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

view, admirable, since the centralized cluster and the change in floor surface kept visitors moving around the periphery of each exhibition space and allowed them an uninterrupted view. (Stepping on the concrete pad activated an alarm system of flashing lights and rhythmic bleats, immensely distracting, but effective in keeping crowds at bay.) Isolating the works on the pads had one enormous benefit: it forced you to take the bases into account as works of art both in themselves and in relation to the sculptures they supported, an important consideration, since the bases are extraordinarily provocative constructions that flirt with a notion of "pure" abstraction quite different from the allusive reductionism that drives the sculptures themselves.

The bases are sometimes also allusive—there's the famous chunky bracket known as "The Guard Dog" (*c.* 1925) that serves as the base of the Guggenheim Museum's *The Sorceress* (1916–24), for example—but more often they seem to refer only, and often quite obliquely, to the sculptures that are placed on them. Sometimes the bases read as more robust, cruder versions of the sculptures, with similar rhythms, similar profiles, and similar massing, but at one remove, at a less intimate scale. At other times, it is not underlying likeness but pure difference that is the issue—difference not only of form and material but also of speed of legibility. The bases are often angular where the sculptures might be curved, ragged where the sculptures might be lovingly smoothed, made of multiple elements where the sculptures might be eloquently singular. Like the sculptures they support, however, the bases are symmetrical, frontal, and essentially about an ideal, albeit interrupted, geometry. Since most of them are vertical and more or less human in size, the superimposed sculptures become "heads" no matter what they allude to, reinforcing the uncanny hieratic presence, that sense of "the sacred object" so dear to my French painter friend and so crucial to Brancusi's work.

In some instances in the Beaubourg installation, the subtle exchange or dramatic contrast between "image" and base was intensified by their being isolated on the pad, in the proximity of related works, just as the subtle differences between serial sculptures became more apparent when they could be seen together. The minute variations between the bronze and marble versions of the hawk-like, Egyptian-inspired bird known as *Maiastra* would have probably gone unnoticed if the two hadn't been paired, like the guardians of an Egyptian tomb. The groupings themselves could easily be justified by citing Brancusi's photographs of his studio. Why then was the installation problematic? Most of the time it wasn't. Unfortunately, the grouping of sculptures from the mid- and late Teens, carved from massive old oaken beams and informed equally by the peasant architecture and furniture of Brancusi's native Romania and his discovery of African sculpture, was exceptionally crowded. These wooden pieces are among Brancusi's most inventive works, with a particularly rich interchange between base and sculpture and a degree of formal playfulness that rarely, if ever, manifests itself in stone. Seeing these marvelous sculptures jammed together, with the first version of the *Endless Column* shoved in among them, was enough to make you question the whole conception of the installation, despite the enormous pleasure offered by the show as a whole. It will be interesting to see what happens when the exhibition goes to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where the selection of works will be slightly different.

The catalogue, at least in its French edition, is an extremely handsome volume with excellent photos and comparative material, informative entries, and a reasonably complete chronology. (French scuttlebutt has it that executor of Brancusi's estate is holding back all the original source material for a publication in preparation, and the Beaubourg catalogue was compiled without access to original sources; whether this is true or not, it appears to contain a great deal of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

useful and interesting material.) The essays, by Friedrich Teja Bach, Margit Rowell, and Ann Temkin, are readable and often illuminating, with a good deal of provocative discussion of methods, sources, and intentions.

One overwhelming question remains. Given the extreme fragility of Brancusi's works, it is not surprising that the Guggenheim's elegant, charming white seal, *The Miracle* (1930–32), a sensual elongated curve supposedly inspired by the way an athletic young woman dived into the ocean, will be seen only in Philadelphia. But its counterpart, the gray marble version known as *The Seal* (1943), is in the collection of the Beaubourg. Yet it was not exhibited. The Parisian malcontents who decried the lack of late sculptures were, in fact, quite right—which takes nothing away from the excellence of the show as a whole. I look forward to seeing the Philadelphia version.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Saul Bellow's Broadway

by Cynthia Ozick

On Broadway it was still bright afternoon and the gassy air was motionless under the leaden spokes of sunlight, and sawdust footprints lay about the doorways of butcher shops and fruit stores. And the great, great crowd, the inexhaustible current of millions of every race and kind pouring out, pressing round, of every age, of every genius, possessors of every human secret, antique and future, in every face the refinement of one particular motive or essence—I labor, I spend, I strive, I design, I love, I cling, I uphold, I give way, I envy, I long, I scorn, I die, I hide, I want. *Faster, much faster than any man could make the tally. The sidewalks were wider than any causeway; the street itself was immense, and it quaked and gleamed . . .*

This is Saul Bellow's "Broadway uptown" in the middle of the twentieth century. "The carnival of the street," he called it, "the dust going round like a woman on stilts." Four and a half decades on, the Upper West Side (roughly from the Seventies all the way up to Columbia University on 116th Street) still clings to Broadway's pouring, pressing, teeming wadi, and the dizzying dust, though descended from its stilts, still goes round and round, crawling into your nostrils and stippling its egalitarian stucco over every race and kind. The fruit stores are still there, run by Koreans. The inexhaustible current of voices is still there, though you are less likely to hear remnants of Yiddish and more likely to hear torrents of Spanish, in dialects up from the Caribbean, from Colombia, Peru, the Dominican Republic, even Mexico. The elderly ladies are still there in the coffee shops, "rouged and mascaraed and hennaed and [they] used blue hair rinse and eye shadow and wore costume jewelry, and many of them were proud and stared at you with expressions that did not belong to their age," and though they still take you in with their youth-ravenous painted stares, the blue hair is as out-of-date as the butcher shop sawdust, and their old New York faces compete now with the Inca faces from the side-street tenements and the lost faces of the homeless on their shreds of blankets. The butcher shops, meanwhile, have mostly been swallowed up by the supermarket chains. And the "cafeteria with the gilded front" is gone.

All the same, Bellow's Broadway uptown —*Seize the Day* was first published in 1956— is nearly intact: the hurrying anonymous lives, the choked and throbbing urban air, the heavy sunlight that makes you "feel like a drunkard." Re-entering the theater of this short novel after more than forty years, you will find the scenery hardly altered.

What *has* altered is the cultural scenery, so to speak, outside the novel.

In 1953, Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* struck out on a course so independent from the tide of American fiction that no literary lessons could flow from it: it left no wake, and cut a channel so entirely idiosyncratic as to be uncopyable. Much earlier,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ernest Hemingway had engineered another radical divergence in the prose of the novel: having inherited the stylistic burden of the nineteenth century, with its elaborate "painting" of interiors and landscapes, its obligatory omniscience, and its essaylike moralizing, he mopped up the excess moisture ("clotting the curds," he called it) and lopped subordinate clauses and chopped dialogue and left little of the old forest of letters standing. An army of succinctness-seekers followed in a movement that accommodated two or three generations of imitators, until finally the distinctive Hemingway dryness flaked off into lifeless desiccation. The Hemingway sentence became a kind of ancestral portrait on the wall, and died of too many descendants. *Augie March*, by contrast (though it had its own ancestors, not so much in style as in character), was in itself too fecund to produce epigones or copyists or offspring—as if every source and resource of procreation were already contained in, or used up by, its own internal energies.

Though a generation apart, both prose revolutions, one much-imitated, the other mimic-proof, were surrounded by an alert and welcoming system. The system was, simply, the idea of the novel as urgent and necessary, as a ubiquitous expectation of life, and it is only in retrospect that we are led to call it a system; once it was as manifest as the kitchen table, on which a novel often lay. Yet it was a system even then, though as little noted as the circulation of the blood: it was the air, it was being itself—an organization of those elements intended, as Bellow said in his 1976 Nobel speech, "to represent mankind adequately." Under that system the novel was looked to; it was awaited. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (itself charged with being imitation Hemingway) took up a whole issue of *Life* magazine, which was to the early Fifties what television later became.

In a 1991 interview, Bellow described those old habits and sensations as the outer system penetrating the inner: "Literature in my early days was still something you lived by; you absorbed it, you took it into your system. Not as a connoisseur, aesthete, lover of literature. No, it was something on which you formed your life, which you ingested so that it became part of your substance, your path to liberation and full freedom." He went on, "I think the mood of enthusiasm and love for literature, widespread in the twenties, began to evaporate in the thirties."

One could take issue with the designated decade; probably every fevered reader will choose the hour of her own youth as that Golden Age when literature was woven into the sinews of the world. What we can be certain of is that the old system (and "The Old System" is the title of one of Bellow's crankiest short stories) is gone—gone *as* a system, meaning as a collective perception, or as the lining, as it were, of a corpus of time. Individuals, of course, go on being born into the life-shock of print, into the recognition (as Bellow set it out in his introduction to Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*) that poets and novelists "give new eyes to human beings, inducing them to view the world differently, converting them from fixed modes of experience."

But in the absence of the old system this wizardlike conversion no longer tosses rapturous signals from reader to reader—so that hearing the phrase "the haying scene," said just like that, will instantly sweep one into the fields with Levin, joyful among the reapers. For that to happen, *Anna Karenina* must be common property. There is plenty of common property nowadays—so many globally fixed modes of experience, pictures clicked into place by that household appliance all families, the richest and the poorest, live with and through. But the images of television, and of film, are immutable and uniform; everything arrives ready-made, already "processed," already envisioned, and, in effect, already *seen*. If literature can give new eyes to human beings, it is because the thing held in common is separately imagined. Utter "I prefer not," and out of these three words Bartleby

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

materializes, your Bartleby and my Bartleby, a mutual Bartleby: yet the seeing differs from mind to mind. And at the same time a tunnel has been dug from mind to mind, and an unsuspected new current runs between them.

"In the greatest confusion," Bellow comments, "there is still an open channel to the soul. It may be difficult to find because by midlife it is overgrown, and some of the wildest thickets that surround it grow out of what we describe as our education. But the channel is always there, and it is our business to keep it open, to have access to the deepest part of ourselves—to that part of us which is conscious of a higher consciousness, by means of which we make final judgments and put everything together." (Be assured that the channel Bellow speaks of is not NBC.) And it is literature that assists in driving a chink into that higher consciousness.

Inklings of the deepest part of ourselves; flashes of the indelible, or call it lightnings from an inner storm—Levin mowing with the peasants, Bartleby's "I prefer not" in Melville's industrious Wall Street.

> And truly Levin had never drunk any liquor so good as this warm water with green bits floating in it, and a taste of rust from the tin dipper. And immediately after this came the delicious slow saunter, with his hand on the scythe, during which he could wipe away the streaming sweat, take deep breaths of air, and look about at the long string of mowers . . .
>
> The longer Levin mowed, the oftener he felt the moments of unconsciousness in which it seemed not his hands that swung the scythe, but the scythe moving of itself, a body full of life and consciousness of its own, and as though by magic, without thinking of it, the work turned out regular and well-finished of itself. These were the most blissful moments.

> "I would prefer not to," said he.
>
> I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his grey eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him; doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors . . .
>
> "I would prefer not to," he replied in a flute-like tone. It seemed to me that while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did.

To these some will want to add certain culminating lines from *The Death of Iván Ilyich*:

> It occurred to him that what had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely that he had not spent his life as he should have done, might after all be true. It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false. And his professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and of his family, and all his social and official interests, might all have been false. He tried to defend all those things to himself and suddenly felt the weakness of what he was defending. There was nothing to defend.

Tommy Wilhelm of *Seize the Day* is present in this company of the higher consciousness, and his convulsion of grief at a stranger's funeral—a great and turbulent wave of introspective terror—belongs with literature's most masterly scenes of transfiguring self-disclosure:

> Standing a little apart, Wilhelm began to cry. He cried at first softly and from sentiment, but soon from deeper feeling. He sobbed loudly and his face grew distorted and hot, and the tears stung his skin . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> Soon he was past words, past reason, coherence. He could not stop. The source of all tears had suddenly sprung open within him, black, deep, and hot, and they were pouring out and convulsed his body, bending his stubborn head, bowing his shoulders, twisting his face, crippling the very hands with which he held the handkerchief. His efforts to collect himself were useless. The great knot of ill and grief in his throat swelled upward and he gave in utterly and held his face and wept. He cried with all his heart . . .
>
> "The man's brother, maybe?"
>
> "Oh, I doubt that very much," said another bystander. "They're not alike at all. Night and day."

When *Seize the Day* first appeared, the old system was fully at work. Ah! How to describe it? Hunger, public hunger; and then excitement, argument, and, among writers, the wildly admiring disturbances of envy. A new book by Bellow! You lived by it, you absorbed it, you took it into your system. *Augie March* had been published three years earlier, in 1953; Bellow was thirty-eight. It was his third novel, following *Dangling Man* (1944) and *The Victim* (1947). These were received, as Diana Trilling put it in *The Nation* in 1948, as "solidly built of fine, important ideas"; Bellow was recognized as a philosophical novelist. But *Augie March* was an eruption, a tumult, a marvel; a critical deluge pursued it. Original even in the scope of its ambition in a mostly narrow decade, it was a work that turned over American fiction, breaking through all restraints of language (mixing the lavish with the raffish) and of range: the barriers of inhibition kicked down, the freed writer exuberantly claiming authority over human and planetary organisms.

There was, besides, another element in Bellow's prose—in the coloration of his mind—that could not be immediately detected, because it contradicted a taken-for-granted sentiment about human character: that the physical body is simply a shell for the nature hidden within, that what I look like is not what I truly am, that my disposition is masked by the configuration of my features. The American infatuation with youth tends to support this supposition: a very young face *is* a sort of mask, and will generally tell you nothing much, and may, in fact, mislead you. Bellow in a way has invented a refreshed phrenology, or theory of the humors; in any case, by the time *Seize the Day* arrived, it was clear he was on to something few moderns would wish to believe in: the human head as characterological map. But such a premise is not a retreat or a regression to an archaic psychology. It is an insight that asks us to trust the condition of art, wherein the higher consciousness can infiltrate portraiture. Disclosure is all. Human flesh has no secrets: Levin's hand on the scythe is the teacher of Levin's soul, Iván Ilyich in his body's decay reads the decay of his soul, Bartleby's frozen serenity incarnates a consummate innerness. Bellow, like every artist, is no dualist—his bodies are not bodies, they are souls. And the soul, too, is disparaged by moderns as an obscurantist archaism.

But Bellow's art escapes the judgment of the merely enlightened. The nursery-rhyme proverb may be more to his liking: my face is my fortune. If manners are small morals, as Hobbes said, then bodies and faces may be morals writ large; or what is meant by soul. Here is Dr. Tamkin, a central character of *Seize the Day*—who may not be a doctor at all:

> What a creature Tamkin was when he took off his hat! The indirect light showed the many complexities of his bald skull, his gull's nose, his rather handsome eyebrows, his vain mustache, his deceiver's brown eyes. His figure was stocky, rigid, short in the neck, so that the large ball of the occiput touched his collar. His bones were peculiarly formed, as though twisted twice where the ordinary human bone was turned only once, and his shoulders rose in two pagodalike points. At mid-body he was thick. He stood pigeon-toed, a sign perhaps that he was devious or had much to hide. The skin of his hands was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> aging, and his nails were moonless, concave, clawlike, and they appeared loose. His eyes were as brown as beaver fur and full of strange lines. The two large brown naked balls looked thoughtful—but were they? And honest—but was Dr. Tamkin honest?

And here is a minor character, the manager of a brokerage office, no more than a walk-on:

> Silvery, cool, level, long-profiled, experienced, indifferent, observant, with unshaven refinement, he scarcely looked at Wilhelm. . . . The manager's face, low-colored, long-nostriled, acted as a unit of perception; his eyes merely did their reduced share. Here was a man . . . who knew and knew and knew.

And about whom there is nothing further to know. What more would the man's biography provide, how would it illuminate? Bellow's attraction to the idea of soul may or may not be derived from an old interest in Rudolf Steiner; but no one will doubt that these surpassingly shrewd, arrestingly juxtaposed particulars of physiognomy are inspired grains of what can only be called human essence.

Dr. Tamkin, curiously, is both essence and absence: which is to say he is a con man, crucially available to begin with, and then painfully evaporated. Wilhelm, strangled by his estranged wife's inflated expenses, father of two boys, runaway husband who has lost his job—salesman for a corporation that promised him advancement and then fired him in an act of nepotism—is drawn to Tamkin as a savior. Tamkin takes Wilhelm's last seven hundred dollars, introduces him (bewilderingly) to the commodities market, pledges a killing in lard, and meanwhile spills out advice on how to live: Tamkin is a philosopher and amateur poet. Wilhelm's vain and indifferent father, Dr. Adler, an elderly widower, also supplies advice, but brutally, coldly.

Much of this futile counsel takes place in the Gloriana, a residence hotel within view of the Ansonia, an ornate Stanford White-era edifice which "looks like a baroque palace from Prague or Munich enlarged a hundred times, with towers, domes," a leftover from the socially ambitious Broadway of a former age. Despite its name, the Gloriana's glory days are well behind it; its denizens are chiefly retired old Jews like Wilhelm's fastidious father and the ailing Mr. Perls, who drags "a large built-up shoe." Wilhelm at forty-four may be the youngest tenant, and surely the healthiest—"big and fair-haired," "mountainous," with "a big round face, a wide, flourishing red mouth, stump teeth." But he is also the humblest: failed husband, failed actor still carrying a phony Hollywood name, broke, appealing to his father for the rent money, pleading with his wife not to squeeze him so hard.

Though maimed and humiliated, Wilhelm is no cynic; he is a not-so naïve believer in search of a rescuer. And because he is hopeful and almost gullible, and definitely reckless, a burnt-out sad sack, he is aware of himself as a hapless comic figure. "Fair-haired hippopotamus!" he addresses his lumbering reflection in the lobby glass. And later, heartlessly: "Ass! Idiot! Wild boar! Dumb mule! Slave!"

Wilhelm may seem even to himself to be a fool, but there are no outright fools in Bellow's varied worlds: all his clowns are idiosyncratic seers. Wilhelm sees that his father is mesmerized by old age as death's vestibule, incapable of compassion beyond these margins: a confined soul, disappointed in his son, Dr. Adler, though affluent enough, refuses him help. "He doesn't forget death for one single second, and that's what makes him like this," Wilhelm thinks. "And not only is death on his mind but through money he forces me to think about it, too. It gives him power over me." Wilhelm may be a hollow flounderer in all other respects—work, wife, sons, father, lover, past, future, all lost—but he can *see*. And he sees a glimmering in Tamkin, a market gambler with Wilhelm's money, a fly-by-night speculator, a trickster, a kind of phantom appearing and disappearing at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

will, an opportunist and exploiter, plainly shady if not an out-and-out crook—he sees that Tamkin is somehow and despite everything a man in whom to put his trust. Pragmatically, this will turn out to be a whopper of a mistake; yet Wilhelm, in a passion of nihilist self-seeing, embracing his blunders, defines himself through misjudgment and miscalculation:

> . . . since there were depths in Wilhelm not unsuspected by himself, he received a suggestion from some remote element in his thoughts that the business of life, the real business—to carry his peculiar burden, to feel shame and impotence, to taste these quelled tears—the only important business, the highest business was being done. Maybe the making of mistakes expressed the very purpose of his life and the essence of his being here. Maybe he was supposed to make them and suffer from them on this earth. And though he had raised himself above Mr. Perls and his father because they adored money, still they were called to act energetically and this was better than to yell and cry, pray and beg, poke and blunder and go by fits and starts and fall upon the thorns of life. And finally sink beneath that watery floor—would that be tough luck, or would it be good riddance?

And still there is hope's dim pulse:

> "Oh, God," Wilhelm prayed. "Let me out of my trouble. Let me out of my thoughts, and let me do something better with myself. For all the time I have wasted I am very sorry. Let me out of this clutch and into a different life. For I am all balled up. Have mercy."

Mercy is what Tamkin brings, even if only briefly, fitfully, almost unrecognizably; he sports "a narrow smile, friendly, calming, shrewd, and wizardlike, patronizing, secret, potent." He spins out sensational stories, difficult to credit, speaks of "love," "spiritual compensation," "the here-and-now," brags of reading Aristotle in Greek ("A friend of mine taught me when I was in Cairo"); he declares himself to be "a psychological poet." His topic is the nature of souls:

> "In here, the human bosom—mine, yours, everybody's—there isn't just one soul. There's a lot of souls. But there are two main ones, the real soul and a pretender soul. Now! Every man realizes that he has to love something or somebody. He feels that he must go outward. 'If thou canst not love, what art thou?' Are you with me?"
>
> "Yes, Doc, I think so," said Wilhelm, listening—a little skeptically, but nonetheless hard.
>
> ". . . The interest of the pretender soul is the same as the interest of the social life, the society mechanism. This is the main tragedy of human life. Oh, it is terrible! Terrible! You are not free. Your own betrayer is inside of you and sells you out. You have to obey him like a slave. He makes you work like a horse. And for what? For who?"
>
> "Yes, for what?" The doctor's words caught Wilhelm's heart. "I couldn't agree more," he said. "When do we get free?"

Tamkin carries on, catching and catching Wilhelm's heart: "The true soul is the one that pays the price. It suffers and gets sick, and it realizes that the pretender can't be loved. Because the pretender is a lie. The true soul loves the truth." Garble and gobbledygook, but with a magnetism that can seduce: love, truth, tragedy, the importance of one's own depths. "As a matter of fact," Tamkin winds up, "you're a profound personality with very profound creative capacities but also disturbances." Wilhelm falls for all this and at the same time doubts. Tamkin soothes, procrastinates, plunges into tangential narratives, distracts, eats, philosophizes, and finally hands Wilhelm four stanzas of semiliterate self-help verse studded with greatness, joy, beauty, ecstasy, glory, power, serenity, eternity. "What kind of mishmash, claptrap is this!" Wilhelm shouts in his thoughts. Yet Tamkin continues to lure him; at the brokerage office, where the doctor, an operator, hurries from stocks to commodities and back again, Wilhelm's breast swarms with speculations about the speculator: "Was he giving ad-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

vice, gathering information, or giving it, or practicing—whatever mysterious profession he practiced? Hypnotism? Perhaps he could put people in a trance while he talked to them."

In the large and clumsy Wilhelm there is a large and clumsy shard of good will, a privately spoken, half-broken unwillingness to be driven solely by suspicion: Tamkin is right to count two disparate souls—only, for Wilhelm, which is the pretender, which the true? Is hopeful trust the true soul, and suspicious doubt the pretender? Or the other way around? For a time it hardly matters: Tamkin is a doctor to Wilhelm's sorrow, a teacher of limitlessness, a snake-oil charlatan whose questionable bottles turn out to contain an ancient and legitimate cure for mortality's anxieties: seize the day. And he is the elfish light that dances over the blackened field, the ignis fatuus of wish and illusion, the healer of self-castigation. The effectively fatherless Wilhelm finds in Tamkin a fairy godfather—but, as might be expected in the land of wishes, one whose chariot melts to pumpkin at the end of the day. Yet again and again, swept away by one fantastic proposition or another, Wilhelm, moved, is led to respond, "This time the faker knows what he's talking about." Or: "How does he know these things? How can he be such a jerk, and even perhaps an operator, a swindler, and understand so well what gives?"

Wilhelm is absurd; sometimes he is childish, and even then, longing for pity and condemning himself for it, he muses: "It is my childish mind that thinks people are ready to give it just because you need it." In spite of a depth of self-recognition, he will burst out in infantile yells and preposterous gestures. Complaining to his father how his wife's conduct and her attitudes suffocate him, he grabs his own throat and begins to choke himself. A metaphor turns into a boy's antics. And after an argument with his wife on a public telephone—during which she accuses him of thinking "like a youngster"—he attempts to rip the telephone box off its wall. There is something of the Marx Brothers in these shenanigans, and also of low domestic farce. "I won't stand to be howled at," counters his wife, hanging up on him. But a man's howl, of anguish or rage, belongs to the Furies, and is not a joke.

Nor is the timing of these incidents. It is the day before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, comprising the most solemn hours of the Jewish liturgical calendar. Old Mr. Rappoport, half-blind, whom Wilhelm encounters at the broker's, reminds him of his synagogue obligations. Wilhelm replies that he never goes; but he reflects on his mother's death, and remembers the ruined bench next to her grave. Dr. Adler, preoccupied with dying as his near destination, has no interest in religion. Wilhelm, though, is fixed on his own destiny, with or without God; and Tamkin is a fixer—a repairer—of destiny and of despair. Yet who is more farcical than Tamkin? Bellow once noted—commenting on the tone of traditional Jewish story-telling—how "laughter and trembling are so curiously intermingled that it is not easy to determine the relations of the two. At times the laughter seems simply to restore the equilibrium of sanity; at times the figures of the story, or parable, appear to invite or encourage trembling with the secret aim of overcoming it by means of laughter."

Seize the Day is such a parable; or, on second thought, perhaps not. The interplay of the comic and the melancholic is certainly there—but a parable, after all, is that manner of fable which means to point a moral, or, at the least, to invoke an instructive purpose. The "secret aim," as Bellow has it, is generally more significant than the telling or the dramatis personae. Bellow's fiction hardly counts as "moral" or instructive (though there are plenty of zealous instructors wandering through). His stories look for something else altogether: call it wisdom, call it ontology, or choose it from what Tamkin in free and streaming flight lets loose: "Creative is nature. Rapid. Lavish. Inspirational. It shapes leaves. It rolls

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the waters of the earth. Man is the chief of this." A tornado of made-up maxims and twisted tales, Tamkin is among the great comic characters (comedy being a corridor to wisdom, though not the only one): that he flaunts his multiple astonishments in the modest compass of a short novel is a Bellovian marvel. And he is, besides, Bellow's sentry in reverse, standing watch over an idea of fiction that refuses borders.

Bellow is sometimes said to be the most "European" of American writers—perhaps because of his familiarity with the century's intellectual currents, his regard for history, the dense and forceful knit of his prose, the sense that nothing has been left out: that what is there is *complete*. That may be why one is compelled to think of the grand Russians when contemplating Bellow (hence Levin, hence Iván Ilyich); even when his characters attend to the trivial, metaphysics enters—as when old Mr. Perls observes that in New York if "you wanted to talk about a glass of water, you had to start back with God creating the heavens and the earth." Wilhelm himself, in the subway tunnel under Times Square, invents a "larger body"—all the unsavory and strange-looking underground people united with him in "a blaze of love."

The larger body, so to speak, of *Seize the Day* is the union of Wilhelm with Bartleby: one can imagine that if Melville had allowed Bartleby a voice beyond those four ineluctable, forlorn, and perplexing syllables, Wilhelm's own torrent of yearning, his thwarted expression of the higher consciousness, are what would have emerged. The linking of Bellow with Europeanness, on the other hand, equates depth and scope with those castled and worn and battered lands, overlooking Melville of New York—Melville who is not nearly an ancestor or relative of Bellow's, but not a stranger either. Bellow's famous sentence is irrefragably American, a wise-guy (or wisdom-guy) contrivance soaked in learning and pathos and irony and inquisitiveness and know-how—and exactly balanced, in *Seize the Day*, between the con artist's lingo and God's machinery of existence.

In the last 140 years Bartleby's Wall Street has altered past recognition. After the flash-by of only forty years Wilhelm's Broadway is scarcely different. You are not likely to catch sight of Bartleby sidling by the Exchange in the deserted dusk of the business district, but up there on roiling Broadway, not far from the Gloriana and the Ansonia, you might possibly hear Tamkin still working his clientele, promising a killing in rye. So they live on, these two New York stories—as queerly close, in the long view, as the Twin Towers; two heartstruck urban tales made to outlast much else.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poems *by Louis Simpson, Elizabeth Spires & Wyatt Prunty*

To a Russian poet

"The yoke of Communism
has been lifted." Congratulations!
You're free to speak and write
your mind, and no one will call you
a parasite. You could be a celebrity.

And that will be what they like,
not your writing. Who has the time
to read these days? And the one thing
all parties, Left and Right,
agree on, is poetry . . . who needs it?

In today's unfettered economy
your poems will have to compete
with "the popular arts," i.e.,
reruns of *I Love Lucy*.
Not much of a public for you . . .

When they have a hundred channels
they'll want to be entertained,
not made to think about "life"
and be sad and melancholy.
For, let's face it, that's what poems do.

You must forgo the meeting
where you recited and the next day
everyone in Leningrad would be talking . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I know, 'Unruly Horses' . . .
but what did it really say?"

You'll be pouring your infinite riches
out in a little room,
to a homeless person who snores
and a woman who misread the schedule.
She thought this week was someone else.

It's your turn now to discover
the answer to the riddle:
what's the sound of one hand clapping?

—Louis Simpson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fisher Beach

Cape Cod

Low tide. Umbrellas dot the beach
in shades of watermelon red, sky blue, and lemon yellow.
The sand bar, completely exposed, lies
like a long spoke poking out into the water.
The bay is warm enough to swim in.
A baby, trailed by its mother, crawls in the shallows,
dipping its nose in, then shaking
its head back and forth violently, like a dog.
The heads of fathers bob in the deeper water;
relaxed, they float on their backs, spout water,
and bellow like sea lions to make their children laugh.
A woman, thin, gray and frail,
is wheeled onto the beach in a deck chair;
an old sea bird, she flings her head back,
taking long, slow, deep breaths, grateful to simply be here.
The beach is casual, disorderly, adrift
in shifting dunes, blowing paper, and washed-up seaweed,
black, briny, and tangled, like mermaid's hair.
Kites dip in the wind, balls are tossed back and forth,
fortifications go up and come back down again,
everyone doing *something*, if only to lie immobile
on bright towels and, like yesterday's ad
for suntan lotion, brazenly worship the sun.

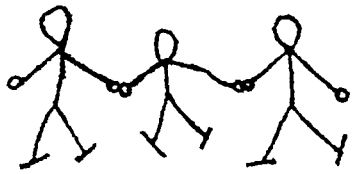
Yesterday, as the sun went down, we spread
a blanket on the sand bar and ate lobster rolls
to celebrate your birthday, almost come.
It was too windy to light a candle, even one,
but did you remember to wish for something?
Suddenly the light changed, turning grim, gray and wild,
as a storm blew toward Truro from Boston.
The tide reversed itself, the water ice-cold,
but you stripped down for a swim,
your long, slow, sure strokes taking you far out,
your head no bigger than the dot on the letter "i,"
Celia and I retreating, wrapped in a beach towel.
At the horizon, you turned and swam back in,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

barely beating the rain, and I let out the breath
I hadn't known I was holding.

Today the light is just right for Sunday painters
or someone more serious, a Seurat or Cézanne
painting promenades and bathers over and over
with everyday titles like *La Plage* or *Sur la Mer*,
hoping to capture life's moment with a few
brushstrokes of color. Yes, it's easy after a few weeks here
to believe we know this place, to feel it's ours,
but if we drew a picture in the sand and signed our names,
it would all be gone by tomorrow, the way we'll be
when we pack the car at dawn and drive to Baltimore.
Still, three children do just that, raking out
giant letters and hieroglyphs in the sand,
unreadable at ground level but probably legible
from the tiny plane that ferries sightseers all day
back and forth from Provincetown to Buzzard's Bay.
What? What do they say?
Climbing the steepest dune on all fours, a clumsy quadruped,
I can make them out, a few words, a date,
that defy, or underscore, the transience of our stay:

T R U R O A U G U S T I



W E W E R E H E R E !

—*Elizabeth Spires*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Reading before we read,
Horoscope and Weather

My father laughing over the morning paper
Where the written world fell open on the funnies,
Manic sports, stalled politics . . . and where
The Horoscope said, "now," the Forecast, "sunny,"

He couldn't laugh enough, so skipped a page,
Then another, till the back door shut,
An engine turned, and I woke up his age
In the mirror of a gray no scissors cut.

He backed out of his pulling in at night
As light elbowed past an opened door, failing
Down six empty steps. Now a wall-switch bites
Blue sparks before the neon's billowing

Over another kitchen's white-on-white
Enameling; and now the sun is up
And climbing through the windows to a height
I follow out and off beyond the steep

Fence and trees to where the sky cuts flat
And blank as the paper spread in front of him,
My father then, waiting till I'd padded in, pulled out
My chair, inched up, and yawned that he begin.

Nothing is as funny now as then.
Still, when they rumple in, they bring his eyes
And mine, squinting and wet with laughing
Over the cracked, cracked up, sidewise, unwise

Stories that I read to them, telling how
We bend, break, wires shorting, knotting and strange;
Never as the Horoscope's predicted "now,"
But as the weather comes, fresh and ignorant of change.

—*Wyatt Prunty*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Theater

The good old summertime

by Mark Steyn

Winter is gloves and homburg
Winter is cold cement
Summer is Sigmund Romberg
In a music tent . . .

It doesn't have to be a tent; it could be an old opera house or high school or barn theater or under the stars. And these days it isn't often Sigmund Romberg, though more's the pity. But around this time of year, during intermission at the last performance of the last production of the summer festival, I find Sheldon Harnick's wistful quatrain jingling somewhere in the back of my head. Summer is when theater redeems itself, gingerly venturing out from its urban bunkers and briefly renewing its ties with the vast mass of non-playgoing Americans. Certainly, play*going* is more pleasurable: I'd much rather be at the New London Barn Theatre, New Hampshire, or the al fresco stage at the Mount, Edith Wharton's manse in the Berkshires, than at the polar opposites of the New York stage—wedged among the theater parties at the Minskoff or Marriott Marquis, vast aircraft hangars of row upon row of Audio Enhancers and Opera Glasses (ah, the magic of live theater!) blinking at the far-distant set; or, conversely, squashed up in a downtown sweatbox on communal ledge-style seating whose very unsuitability to the human form is a measure of the audience's commitment. The seating always strikes me as a physical manifestation of theater's defensiveness: theater, they tell you, isn't like film or TV, it requires a greater "commitment." Maybe, but not so long ago a chair in a theater wasn't so very different from a chair in a living room. Now, while most of America sprawls in its La-Z-Boy Recliner sated on delivery pizza and sock-mop demonstrations from the Home Shopping Network, the last five theatergoers perch on a ledge—very metaphorical. In summer, at least until Labor Day, theater comes off the ledge and tells the rest of the country what's on its mind.

To judge from the theater industry publications, what's on its mind, in the wake of Oklahoma City, is the militia movement and the Christian Coalition. In column after column, they bemoan the rise of militant, evangelical bigotry, and urge their colleagues to pick up those pens right now. Hey, terrific! If you feel that passionately about it, it's bound to be great drama: I'd love to see a play about the Michigan Militia or the Ruby Ridge siege or the Northwest Imperative "white flight" movement, whether savage satire or tense docudrama. But then you read on. The gun nuts and holy rollers aren't supposed to provoke us into writing *plays*, they're supposed to provoke us into writing our Congressman to persuade him not to vote against the NEA. Indeed, theatrical myopia is such that the Oklahoma bombing or the Contract with America are now cited merely as evidence of how critical the fight against

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

funding cuts has become. Right. I'm sure, when the Archduke was shot in Sarajevo, the *Austro-Hungarian Times-Picayune* cultural commentator wrote a strong leader saying, "Don't you realize the implications for our operetta outreach programs?"

One author to attack the subject head on, at the Humana Festival of New American Plays (Actors' Theatre, Louisville, Kentucky), was Jane Martin in *Middle-Aged White Guys*. The eponymous trio wind up nude—or buck nekked, as we white guys say—standing before the audience with a sign saying "I'm sorry" in atonement for the catalogue of sins committed over the years by white guy-ism. You could hear the sighs even from this sympathetic audience. It's a memorable image, and it could be a powerful image—but it hasn't been earned by the drama; it doesn't arise out of anything, so, even as parody, it just seems a cheap and trashy effect. If it symbolizes anything, it's the wishful thinking in Miss Martin's play. Robert Sherwood and Maxwell Anderson could get pretty preachy, but for the most part they allowed their characters to be true to themselves. Today's playwrights, apparently so exercised by all these nutcases littering the landscape, seem either too nervous or too lazy to get out there and find out what they're like. Paranoia? Xenophobia? Dramatist, heal thyself! I speak from a position of some smugness on this, as one of my few contacts in the White Mountain Militia I met at a summer stock production of *Forever Plaid*, since when he has sent me much interesting literature. (He enjoyed the show, by the way.)

As it was, it was left to Martin Charnin's re-tooling of *Can-Can* (Goodspeed Opera House, East Haddam, Connecticut) to address with most vigor this brutal war on the arts. Charnin is an engaging and versatile fellow, whose political writing has so far been confined to the scene in *Annie* in which the little orphan and Sandy the Dog, mainly through their spirited rendition of "The Sun'll Come Out Tomorrow," persuade F.D.R. to launch the New Deal. He didn't deal with the terrible ratchet effect in increased federal jurisdiction which the Roosevelt administration set in motion (my friend in the White Mountain Militia again), but it was, after all, only a thirty-two-bar song. This time round, Charnin has adapted an old Cole Porter warhorse about the saucy high-kicking dance so scandalous that the Parisian judiciary attempt to ban it. With engagingly daft inventiveness, Charnin sees this as a parable of Jesse Helmsian censorship. The parallel between a dance in Montmartre and Andres Serrano is obviously absurd, and not just because the former is a can-can while the latter is on the can—though that in itself is not unrevealing about cultural evolution in the last hundred years. As Porter himself wrote:

> In olden days, a glimpse of stocking
> Was looked on as something shocking
> But now, God knows
> Anything Goes . . .

To which one might add:

> In modern times, just pass your urine
> And you'll find that soon it's tourin'
> To loud 'Bravo!'s
> Anything Goes . . .

The issue, needless to say, is not censorship: as Senator Helms and Patrick Buchanan gleefully point out time after time, they don't care what these guys do with their bullwhips and bodily fluids but they don't see why the public should pay for it. Porter, incidentally, is an exemplar of this philosophy: he had much the same taste in rough trade as Robert Mapplethorpe, but he pursued it on his own nickel. I think he'd be amused at having his catalogue co-opted in support of the bodily waste brigade: *C'est magnifique*, to quote one of the song titles here, *mais ce n'est pas le merde*. Luckily, Charnin is such a gorgeous vulgar Broadway razzle-dazzler that, whenever he has to choose between the kickline and the subtext, the gals win every time.

Musicals are always the disappointment

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of summer theater. Unlike the plays, they follow too slavishly the fashions in New York, so they wind up as a three-year echo of Broadway's ever more faltering voice. This season, the stock and amateur rights of the Kander and Ebb revue *And the World Goes Round* became available, and productions of one standard or another rippled across the map. I caught a "community theater" production in Bradford, Vermont. The women were like those in the audience: big and beefy, which lent an air of menace to the sex-kitten numbers. The men were like nothing you ever see in the North Country, and you assume they must have been helicoptered in from Fire Island or Provincetown. Halfway through the title song from *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, introduced on Broadway by Chita Rivera suspended in a huge web, the biggest moth in the state settled on the hapless actor's cheek. Almost literally petrified, he froze in position, staring at it cross-eyed while his singing voice slowly faded away. In its way, this was the most exquisite reduction of Hal Prince's original staging. For the rest, you could only marvel at the remoteness of the show from any genuine human experience: sporting tacky tuxes and rented frocks, the cast were obsessed with trying to be Broadway, and so wound up like a parody of what's already a parody.

Elsewhere, though, the locals managed to save Broadway from itself. In the big town, *The Will Rogers Follies* was a characteristically hollow Tommy Tune spectacle that grew ever more freakish with each cast replacement—Mickey Rooney, Frank Gifford, Marla Maples. Typically, Tune insisted on a set design that wouldn't be visible from certain parts of the house, so the producers couldn't sell those seats, which meant, as they gradually realized, even if the show ran forever, they'd never make any money. On the road in Connecticut last year, the dog act burned to death after it had been left in a parked van which incinerated. "Pity it wasn't Tune," said one producer to me, with feeling. Shorn of Tune's excesses, the show, as seen at the Hampton Playhouse on the New Hampshire coast and also at the Weathervane up in the mountains, allows at least something of its nominal hero to emerge. A little of Will Rogers goes a long way with me—"I never met a man I didn't like" reminds me of debating society syllogisms like "All human actions are selfish": in demonstrating its truth, you also demonstrate its meaninglessness. But, whatever else may be said, Rogers is about words and feelings—and Tune is hopeless at both. The show will never be great, but these productions were the better for his absence.

The plays roam a wider field than do the musicals, a reminder of worlds long lost to New York theater. Although the troupe of Shakespeare & Company (Lenox, Massachusetts) denies her billing, for me their star is Edith Wharton. Not just because their theater's called the Wharton Salon, and happens to be her salon, nor because the plays are especially good: Dennis Krausnick's adaptation-by-the-yard job on "Afterward" and "Expiation" is as lumbering as his title, *Wharton to a Tea*, suggests; and his other offering, *The Fiery Rain*, takes a trunkload of liberties with the Wharton/Henry James/Morton Fullerton relationship in an attempt to turn it into an anything-goes sex triangle. Yet, throughout, both production and setting (her home, after all) combine to conjure a sensibility as remote from modern theatrical indulgences as possible, a world in which conventions and characters find themselves in discreet but fierce social tension. Unspoken restraint, polite resistance . . . It's hard to imagine anything more out of tune with stage fashion. The disciplines of form—both social and theatrical—count for nothing off-Broadway: we're playing tennis with the net down, as Robert Frost said of free verse. With Wharton, the net's as taut as it can get.

Up the road at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, artistic director Peter Hunt opted for that familiar theme, family. It would be easy to mock, except that the Great American Family Drama, the bedrock of our

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stage for most of this century, can sometimes crackle when played before audiences in small rural towns and suburbs in a way it rarely does when played before loucher metropolitan crowds. Summer theater is packaged and sold to us as an affirmation of community, and, at its worst, the bland guff of the marketing infects what's up on stage; a good family drama allows the audience to test that faith in community, which is about as testing as summer theater's prepared to go. The Great American Family Drama is also clearly an endangered species, which is why even the reappearance of *All the Way Home* is welcome. Tad Mosel's play, a Broadway hit in the 1960–61 season, isn't top-drawer, but it's based on a better book —James Agee's *A Death in the Family*—and it's meaty stuff for the right players. An autobiographical slice of Tennessee life in 1915, it concerns the death in an automobile accident of Jay Follett, a country boy indifferent to religion, and the meaning of that death for both his devout Catholic wife and their children. Williamstown did a peachy *Picnic* a few years back and, even though Mosel is no Inge, I was hoping for something similar, a vivid questioning of life in the face of its vicissitudes. *All the Way Home* has two strong performances in the underrated Linda Purl as Follet's wife and Kim Hunter as Aunt Hannah—Miss Hunter's solid, unobtrusive, pragmatic reading being an especially fine example of the stellar supporting player you find more often in the regions than on Broadway these days. But the rest of the cast and Paul Weidner's production are too broad, fatally undermining the poetic-realist style which dignifies so many plays of the period. It's about memory and reflection and the light that death can cast on the life that preceded it—all of which I mention because they're vague mood things that are intensified by effective lighting. The lighting here is quite extraordinarily flat, which means that, from morning to night, no time ever seems to pass.

The Ferry Back throws a different light on death in the family. A two-hander written by and starring Bronwen Denton-Davis, with Christopher Allen Martin, it's set on the boat from Wales to Ireland. I'd assumed, because of the location, that it would be about the relationship between John Bull and his other island, or maybe an examination of the mass emigration which continues to enfeeble Ireland. Instead, as soon becomes clear, Miss Denton-Davis has in mind a particular aspect of cross-channel traffic: the steady flow of young Irish women taking the ferry for abortions on the British National Health Service. Over there, this is regarded as part and parcel of the genial hypocrisy of the modern Irish state: an independent, reactionary Catholic state is only possible because you can go next door to the godless Brits to get your condoms and abortions and jobs and tabloid newspapers. The author, though, seems uninterested in the specifics—the Irishness—of the situation except that, as an American, she's affronted by it. "In Ireland," her character explains, "by law any man's seed is more sacred than any woman's life."

Now this woman is on the night boat to Dun Laoghaire, she's in great pain and she's just had an abortion. I don't think, at this moment, that she'd be spouting pro-choice slogans. I don't believe she'd be that rational, objective, collected. What she'd be saying would be personal and painful and confused. That's nothing to do with my view of the "abortion debate," but just based on my experience of women in the immediate aftermath of an abortion and of a friend who miscarried on the Dublin night boat. It's a good rule of drama to let the play make the argument, but not the character. "The poet should seize the Particular," said Goethe, "and he should, if there be anything sound in it, thus represent the Universal." The author starts with a gripping, very Particular situation but she throws it away because she can't wait to get to the Universal. In essence, she aborts her own character, and, as she has to play her onstage every night, she must surely notice the loss.

At the end of the opening scene, the woman, Megan, has been befriended by

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a shambling, ruddy, bearded do-gooder. "Jayzuz!" she gasps as she faints. "I'm here," he says softly. Yes, it's *that* bearded do-gooder—Jesus of Nazareth, reincarnated on a B&I ferry to express solidarity with a woman's right to choose. I noted last year how AIDS dramas had taken to routine invocations of the deity. Now the device seems to be spreading to other "issue" plays. We'd all like to say "God is on our side," but, as with the *Middle-Aged White Guys'* nude scene, you can't see what the drama's done to deserve it. At least, Martin Charnin, in his song'n'dance indictment of Jesse Helms, makes no higher claim than that Cole Porter is on his side. From this moment on, the play is of interest chiefly for the audience's curious indifference to the introduction of Jesus: they're not offended, they're not provoked, they're not amused; they just accept it as one of those things that happens in this kind of play. Jesus, by the way, represents the true voice of Christianity in contrast, he says, to the established church: "What they neglected to highlight was that the heart of it all was compassion." The deadness of that sentence—its inadequacy both as Irish English and as spiritual language—speaks most eloquently for the author's grasp of the subject.

Miss Bronwen-Davis could learn from the play around the corner, on the Williamstown main stage. Noël Coward's *Present Laughter* illustrates better than any of his other comedies the paradox of his talent: that he is only profound when he is being trivial, that his depth is on the surface. When he tries being deep and profound, as he does in the later plays, he's just cringe-making. Deliberate or not, it's Coward's unique variation on Goethe's advice: he accumulates inconsequential Particulars yet through them conveys some fundamental Universal. In *Present Laughter*, first staged in 1942, he concedes his own artificiality: the play is a light comedy about a light comedian, Garry Essendine, a charmer for whom charm is an armor. Originally, Garry used charm to protect his real, inner self; now it substitutes for a real, inner self. In Coward's performance, even as he insisted on the emptiness of his charm, the audience loved him for it. In that sense, Essendine is the essence of theater, for every audience wants to be charmed. The play includes the definitive Coward scene. The emotions are false and are acknowledged as such, and yet, as the banal observations get ever more idiotic, the erotic charge becomes palpable:

> GARRY *prowling about*: How was the Toscanini concert?
>
> JOANNA: Glorious. *She sits down.* He played the Eighth and the Seventh.
>
> GARRY: Personally I prefer the Fifth.
>
> JOANNA: I like the Ninth best of all.
>
> GARRY *casually sitting beside her on the sofa*: There's nothing like the dear old Ninth.
>
> JOANNA: I love the Queen's Hall, don't you? It's so uncompromising.
>
> GARRY *taking her hand*: I love the Albert Hall much more.
>
> JOANNA *leaning against him*: I wonder why. I always find it depressing.
>
> GARRY *taking her in his arms*: Not when they do "Hiawatha," surely?
>
> JOANNA *dreamily*: Even then.
>
> GARRY *his mouth on hers*: I won't hear a word against the Albert Hall.
>
> *The lights fade and the Curtain falls*

This is what David Schweizer, director of this revival, does with those lines: he cuts them. Worse than the interpolated Americanisms—"cookie" for "biscuit," "I'll bet"—it encapsulates the stager's lack of sympathy for Coward. He institutes a little directorial "concept"—that, at key speeches, garish, old-fashioned footlights go up and Garry addresses his lines to the audience direct—though he then abandons it in the second half. This is meant to be theatrical, but it's lumbering and literal and heavily underlined; Coward's theatricality is sly, throw-away, lightly worn. The play introduces an earnest young playwright, Ronald Maule, who tells Garry: "I know you only play rather trashy stuff as a rule, and I thought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you just might like to have a shot at something deeper . . . All you do with your talent is to wear dressing gowns and make witty remarks." He is gormless and charmless. In this production, Schweizer lets Garret Dillahunt turn him into a likable Monty Python nerd and the performance seduces the scene away from Essendine: as he exits, Roland gets a huge hand from the audience. How could any director let that happen? As Essendine, Byron Jennings gives a finely modulated Cowardesque interpretation, but everything around him is pulling the piece all over the place. Coward's play is a justification of charm; Schweizer's production is a demolition of it.

But, when you think of it, how odd that *Present Laughter* survives at all, turning up in New England and Michigan and Illinois without benefit of TV ads, radio airplay, McDonald's Supersize meals. On the day Disney swallowed ABC, I attended a local theatrical fund-raiser. Under the stars we sat as the schoolkids and the town band and an amateur barbershop quartet performed their favorites: "In the Good Old Summertime," "The Band Played On," "Shine On, Harvest Moon" . . . With the exception of a song from *Finian's Rainbow* and a Fifties doowop number, I couldn't count an item that wasn't at least seventy years old. Somewhere down the pike *Pocahontas* is showing and the radio's playing the big hit ballad, but somehow, just about, an authentic popular culture survives: these are just the songs that folks like to sing on those occasions when an ever more passive culture briefly returns to being a participatory one.

It's a sign of the unimportance of theater that, in all those "corporate synergy" articles accompanying the Disney swoop, no one thought it worth mentioning their move into theater. The stage version of *Beauty and the Beast* is installed at the Palace Theatre until the next century, even though what's left of New York's legit community despises it as a mere merchandising spin-off and resents the way the show can afford a bottomless TV advertising budget because of *contra* deals with the Disney Channel (and now, presumably, ABC). Now, Disney is following that success with stage versions of its back catalogue in cities all over America. Within five years, Disney is likely to be the biggest theater producer in America. In 1997, it will re-open the New Amsterdam on Forty-second Street, a Broadway landmark, once home to *The Merry Widow*, *The Ziegfeld Follies*, Walter Huston in *Othello*, but soon to be a flagship in Disney's fleet of theme-park theaters.

It ought to be said that the blockbusters which revived Disney are all by theater men: *Aladdin* is by Alan Menken, who wrote *Little Shop of Horrors*; *The Lion King* is by Tim Rice of *Evita*; *Pocahontas* by Stephen Schwartz, begetter of *Godspell*. These boys made millions for the Shuberts and the Nederlanders and the other producers, and whenever I speak to them they always say they'd much rather be writing for the stage. But, whenever they've tried, they've been told it's going to take eight years of workshops and try-outs and rewrites. To get to Broadway, it's quicker to write it for Disney and let them buy you a theater.

The pulse of a civilization is its middlebrow culture, and the best you can reasonably hope for is a society that reads P. G. Wodehouse and goes to Gilbert and Sullivan. But today, with the depravity of low culture and the self-indulgence of high culture, what's left in the middle is a bland, dissembling monolith that looms wherever you turn. Does it matter that Disney's theater shows are only souvenirs of the film? No. Because the film is only a souvenir of the Burger King meal tie-in, which is only a souvenir of the plastic doll . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

"Florine Stettheimer: Manhattan Fantastica"

by Mario Naves

As the end of the century approaches, it becomes increasingly obvious that the standard histories of twentieth-century American art are in need of revision. Reputations that once seemed incontrovertibly major now appear meager, while so-called minor talents are beginning to look substantial, or, at least, more interesting than was once supposed. (This is assuming, of course, that artists are to be judged by their art rather than by extra-aesthetic criteria.) And while the myth of the great lost artist is largely that, there are, undoubtedly, fine painters and sculptors who have not yet met with serious appraisal and are unknown to the general public, as well as to those who make art their vocation.

Such may be the case with Florine Stettheimer (1871–1944). I first encountered Stettheimer's paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, about four years ago, while meandering through a survey of twentieth-century American painting cobbled together from the museum's holdings. Her *Cathedral* paintings, four works that take as their subject the social and cultural life of New York City from the late Twenties to the early Forties, took me by surprise. While the artist's name was vaguely familiar, the paintings were new to me and curious. Their idiosyncrasies recalled folk art, but the *Cathedral* paintings were decidedly not the work of an "outsider": their humor betrayed an artistic temperament as sophisticated as it was acerbic. I found the *Cathedral* paintings funny and diverting—diverting enough to make me wonder what else Stettheimer had accomplished.

Since then I have learned, from friends and colleagues, that discovering Stettheimer by happenstance is something of a commonplace among her admirers. It was reassuring, then, to read that both Elisabeth Sussman and Barbara J. Bloemink, organizers of the Stettheimer show now up at the Whitney,[1] learned about her as a result of pursuing other projects: Sussman, while writing about Irene Rice Pereira; Bloemink, while researching the correspondence of Georgia O'Keeffe. Their shared enthusiasm for Stettheimer's work has resulted in a most welcome exhibition.

"Manhattan Fantastica" is the first full-scale retrospective of Stettheimer's work since 1946, when her friend Marcel Duchamp organized a posthumous exhibition of her paintings at MOMA. Although she exhibited sporadically during her lifetime, Stettheimer's only solo exhibition, at M. Knoedler & Company in 1916, was poorly

1 "Florine Stettheimer: Manhattan Fantastica" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on July 13, 1995, and remains on view through November 5. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by the Whitney and Harry N. Abrams (144 pages, $39.95; $30 paper). Co-curator Barbara Bloemink's biography, *The Life and Art of Florine Stettheimer*, is due out late this month from Yale University Press (320 pages, $45).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

received, an experience which left an indelible mark on her. Subsequently, Stettheimer refused commercial representation, even turning down Alfred Stieglitz's invitation to exhibit at his gallery, forsaking probable notoriety.

Being of independent means and, one feels, a resolute demeanor, Stettheimer could afford such isolation. For her, painting became an entirely private pursuit, and though she freely showed her work to those in her circle, it was not for sale and she did little to promote herself as an artist. It is fortunate, in fact, that her work still exists at all. Stettheimer intended that her entire artistic output be destroyed upon her death. Her sister Ettie, acting as executor, refused to do so, instead making arrangements to have Stettheimer's paintings placed in museums throughout the country. In a roundabout way, "Manhattan Fantastica" has the peculiar distinction of being the product of family disloyalty.

If Stettheimer's obscurity was, in part, of her own making, her paintings did eventually acquire an enthusiastic, if small, audience. Sussman attributes the rehabilitation of Stettheimer's reputation to feminism, gay liberation, and Pop Art, taking pains to inform us that Jasper Johns holds her paintings in high esteem, as did Andy Warhol. Those of us less inclined to consider Johns and Warhol as oracles of wisdom are lucky that "Manhattan Fantastica" is as good as it is. By the current standards of the Whitney, the surprisingly no-nonsense presentation of this exhibition must seem hopelessly passé; it treats Stettheimer's paintings with respect, allowing them breathing room with a minimum of pushy wall labels. Given the "inspiration" seen in the installation of "Edward Hopper and the American Imagination," up the stairs from "Manhattan Fantastica," one should be grateful for small (and uninspired) favors.

The first painting one sees upon entering "Manhattan Fantastica" is *New York/Liberty* (1918), a view of the southern tip of Manhattan, replete with the Staten Island Ferry, the Brooklyn Bridge, Woodrow Wilson, and a lumpish, three-dimensional Statue of Liberty jutting out from the painting's surface. What is remarkable about *New York/Liberty* is neither the picture's formal resolve—as painting, it has its problems—nor its amusing agglomeration of details, but its heartfelt celebration of the United States and, in particular, New York City. *New York/Liberty* is a picture about love, and it is indicative of our times that Stettheimer's patriotic valentine is as unnerving as it is. As unnerving, one might say, as it is moving. While it is easy to see why fans of camp would find an image like *New York/Liberty* appealing, its corniness, if you will, is genuine. Stettheimer's paintings carry a candor that shows up most contemporary kitsch-based art for the snobbery that it is.

Florine and her sisters, Ettie and Carrie, along with their mother, Rosetta, opened their home on the Upper West Side to some of the most important artists of the time; among those who attended the Stettheimers' salons were Charles Demuth, Elie Nadelman, Gaston Lachaise, Marsden Hartley, and Duchamp. It was this milieu that prompted some of Stettheimer's finest paintings, and Sussman and Bloemink are wise to concentrate on her mature period. Her pre-stylistic paintings, of which there are few on view, are best left to Stettheimer specialists. Certainly, a painting like *Family Portrait #1* (1915), with its lackluster drawing and halting brushwork, makes one commiserate with the critics who panned the Knoedler exhibition. Even so, this painting holds a key to understanding the course Stettheimer's mature work would take and it can be found in the flower arrangement which sits just right of center. It is the one part of *Family Portrait #1* where Stettheimer follows the logic of painting and, as such, it delivers, especially in its use of hard, strong color. The flowers are so convincing, in fact, that they have more emotional life than the mannequins which surround them.

Stettheimer's portraits of family and friends can be fun, but in a circumscribed way. Each portrait is crammed with inci-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dent, sometimes to an almost encyclopedic extent, relating to its subject. Writing in the catalogue, Bloemink deciphers the imagery found in some of the portraits, and it's colorful stuff: Stettheimer made sure all the relevant information was there, including, for instance, Carl Van Vechten's favorite tabby. But, as works of art, the portraits miss the forest for the trees. Stettheimer is so intent on making her portraits *specific* that they become mired in details. Consequently, they function better as rebuses, albeit nutty ones, than as orchestrated works of art. Admittedly, the portraits are filled with morsels of splendid painting—the muffled, nubby landscape seen in the distance of *Portrait of My Sister Carrie W. Stettheimer with Dollhouse* (1923), for instance—but they also divulge Stettheimer's folk-art mannerisms as flimsy drawing. The one exception is *Portrait of Ettie* (1923), a scarily unforgettable portrait of her sister. Lying on a chaise longue while floating in a deep blue space, Ettie is overwhelmed by what appears to be a burning Christmas tree; it is as persuasive a piece of Expressionist-style dabbing as Stettheimer ever did. With *Portrait of Ettie*, Stettheimer's obsessiveness achieves the visionary.

Stettheimer became more confident as a painter the more cartoonish her work became. One can see this in *Picnic at Bedford Hills* (1918), a picture of the artist, her sisters, Nadelman, and Duchamp lunching on what could be described as a skewed Fauvist landscape. Here Stettheimer's figures take on a caricaturish stylishness not unlike that found in the more upscale cartoons of the time, and this comic exuberance informs her best paintings. While Stettheimer's work suggests biography—which is, more often than not, exactly what it is—it is not necessary to read her best paintings as such to gain pleasure from them. Her work has its own oddball momentum, and the small dramas played out in the paintings gain comedic and pictorial dimension the less they rely on biographical particulars. This may be why Stettheimer's finest paintings are her multi-figure compositions. She's at her best when building rhythms between forms, especially a multiplicity of forms, and using her particulars for emphasis.

Such is the case with *Lake Placid* (1919), *Asbury Park South* (1920), and *Spring Sale at Bendel's* (1921), the latter of which must qualify as Stettheimer's masterpiece. One of Stettheimer's great loves was dance—the maquettes for her own unrealized ballet, *Orphée of the Quat'z Arts*, are impressive and weird—and a strong sense of choreography buoys these paintings. *Spring Sale at Bendel's*, in particular, is a ceaseless flow of movement, unified by an acidic pink that has Stettheimer's name on it. (Stettheimer's color sense veered toward the poisonous.) Its images of women shopping and trying on outfits have the cadence and theatricality of an MGM musical, and it is made up of silly bits of business: a small yellow dog wearing a sweater emblazoned with a dollar sign, women diving for sale items. Here Stettheimer's minutiae lend comedy to a painting with an already comic momentum. The final result is an elegant giddiness, cosmopolitan and without pretension.

Sussman and Bloemink conclude "Manhattan Fantastica" with the *Cathedral* paintings, perhaps taking their cue from Linda Nochlin's 1980 essay on the artist, "Rococo Subversive," wherein they are heralded as Stettheimer's masterpieces. (The essay is included in the catalogue.) Some four years later, I find the *Cathedral* paintings—dedicated to Broadway, Fifth Avenue, Wall Street, and Art—still funny and diverting, but something of a letdown. Like the portraits, they are bursting with telling, hilarious details, but the details are clumped together on the canvases in such a way that one's eye tends to bump into the various scenarios depicted; there's little pictorial flow. If *Asbury Park South* achieves the dynamism of dance, a painting like *Cathedrals of Wall Street* simply strikes a pose. Stettheimer's spark, so present in her best paintings, is missing here, and her color and paint handling, having become subservient to illustration, are less vital. If the charm of most folk art lies in the anecdotal, then so

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it is with the *Cathedral* paintings. Despite their eccentricities, they are tame—tame, that is, for Stettheimer.

The introductory wall label of "Manhattan Fantastica" states that "no history of American Modernism can truly be complete without Stettheimer's work." This is standard curatorial hyperbole, but it is difficult to be unsympathetic all the same. That she was a fascinating character in the cultural life of early-twentieth-century New York is unquestionable. As a painter, however, Stettheimer is a minor, one could say marginal, figure. Marginality, as it has come to be known in the political sense, is, of course, what the contemporary art world finds so appealing about her: Why else would *Soirée/Studio Party* (1917–19) grace the cover of *Artforum*? Stettheimer's marginality, however, is both her chief asset and chief liability, and to politicize her work misses the point and dishonors her art. (I wonder what Stettheimer herself would think of the "social consciousness" Nochlin foists upon her—probably come up with a biting painting or two, I'd imagine.) A handful of these paintings—*Spring Sale at Bendel's*, *Lake Placid*, *Asbury Park South*, *Portrait of Ettie*, *Beauty Contest: To the Memory of P. T. Barnum* (1924), and, maybe, *Russian Bank* (1921)—are undeniable gems worthy of posterity. But if the artist revealed in "Manhattan Fantastica" is an erratic one, even the least convincing of her pungent paintings have more to offer than, say, the clever fripperies of her friend and champion Marcel Duchamp. So give the Whitney credit for doing it right. "Manhattan Fantastica" adds an honorable chapter to the understanding of the art of our misunderstood times.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

The sensational Miss Alcott *by James W. Tuttleton*
The qualities of Robert Musil *by Roger Kimball*
Imperial Berlin revisited *by William Jay Smith*
Four poems by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore
translated & with an introduction by Louis Simpson
W. V. Quine reconsidered *by Jenny Teichman*
Albert Camus: his last novel *by Renee Wingarten*
New poems *by William Logan, Frederick Morgan & others*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Music

Jascha Heifetz

by Tim Page

Some ten years ago, I set out to write the first full biography of Jascha Heifetz. The violinist was then still living—in a grand, gated mansion toward the top of Beverly Hills—but, despite intercession on my behalf from several mutual acquaintances, Heifetz refused to cooperate in any way. He had never much cared for publicity; in 1939, he summed up his life for Deems Taylor: "Born in Russia, first lessons at three, debut in Russia at seven, debut in America in 1917. That's all there is to say, really. About two lines."

Over the next months, however, I conducted almost twenty hours of taped interviews with those who had known Heifetz throughout his life. Mistaking quantity for quality, I thought I was making progress until the evening I played through part of my archive. And then I realized that I had absolutely nothing on which to build a book—only a vague portrait of a rigidly formal, exceedingly isolated, and not especially pleasant man who happened to play the violin with a technique that knew no difficulties and an idiosyncratic and affecting warmth that transcended the patrician authority of his approach.

Apparently, there were few *events* in the Heifetz story: he came, he played, he conquered, again and again—and then he went home. Friendships were uncommon and circumscribed, brought to an end, more often than not, by petty quarrels; there were two marriages, followed by two fairly nasty divorces. One is tempted to say that Heifetz ended up a lonely man, but since there is no evidence that he knew, believed, or even suspected this was the case, all one can do is affirm that most of us would have been very lonely under similar circumstances.

To date, there has not been a reliable life of Heifetz. And so *The Heifetz Collection*, a vast trove of sixty-five compact discs (arranged into forty-six self-sufficient volumes) issued earlier this year by BMG Classics, may prove the best "biography" of the violinist for many years to come. Certainly, it captures everything that was most interesting and attractive about Jascha Heifetz. He had one of the longest recording careers in history—more than sixty years, a span rivaled only by Mischa Elman, Vladimir Horowitz, Yehudi Menuhin, Claudio Arrau, Leopold Stokowski, and the Australian baritone Peter Dawson (some other musicians will be joining this club very soon). And now, with one small but significant omission, the entire discography is available to us, in digitally remastered sound, with program notes that are engaging as well as specific.

String players and aficionados with the means (approximately $600) will doubtless have purchased the entire set by this point. It is by any standard a worthwhile investment—the listener will be rewarded by close to 100 hours of superlative violin playing—but it is also curiously *static*. There is a natural human temptation to funnel facts

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into tidy narrative, to chart "growth" in our artists over time, but Heifetz was not a markedly better violinist in 1972 than he was in 1917. He seems to have sprung to life fully formed—male-child Minerva with a fiddle—and, if anything, in some of the later Heifetz albums, one has the sense of a perfection that is rapidly tiring of itself.

Still, it is this very technical perfection that made Heifetz so important. One may question his interpretations—indeed, one may actively dislike them—but, on a purely objective level, it doesn't matter very much. We live in a century that has placed enormous value on the ability to "prove" merit—remember those twelve-tone compositions that were inseparable from their analyses? the art works that came ready-made with theoretical justification?—and Heifetz can be *proven*. Whether or not we like what he does with his violin, there can be no denying that he elevated performance standards to a new level of exactitude. After Heifetz, a slurred phrase was no longer accepted as a soulful indulgence; it was only a slurred phrase. He showed just what could be done with a violin; if Heifetz is partially to blame for the mechanical, metronomic violinists of today—those aging *Wunderkinder* who skate flawlessly and meaninglessly through everything that is put in front of them—the fact remains that he was a genuine Olympian, however austere.

Almost all of Heifetz's recordings were made for what was initially the Victor Talking Machine Company, was then RCA Victor, then RCA Red Seal, and has now been transmogrified into a division of BMG Classics. The exceptions are some fine performances for EMI in the 1930s, a handful of charming smaller pieces for Decca in 1945, and the live recording of Heifetz's 1972 farewell recital in Los Angeles that was issued on Columbia Masterworks. All these have been incorporated into *The Heifetz Collection*; the only known omission among Heifetz's published recordings is a remarkable Russian 1911 disc that turned up in the mid-1980s and for which BMG was unable to secure the rights. (A London-based magazine called *The Strad* issued portions of this precious souvenir on a plastic "giveaway" disc inserted in the pages of its February 1986 issue; suffice it to say that Heifetz was already recognizably Heifetz before he reached puberty.)

Those who don't care for Heifetz's work sometimes dismiss him as a great encore player. Such an estimation is unfairly reductive, but he really *was* an absolute master of the violin miniature. And, because the one-sided 78-RPM record could only contain roughly four and one-half minutes of music, most of Heifetz's first recordings were devoted to encore pieces.

How well our grandparents knew the music Heifetz recorded between 1917 and 1925, in his teens and early twenties, at the old Victor studios in Camden, New Jersey! Here they are—transcriptions of Schubert's "Ave Maria," Schumann's "Widmung," Mendelssohn's "On Wings of Song," and Chopin nocturnes, fragments from concertos by Tchaikovsky and Mendelssohn, showpieces by Paganini, Wieniawski, Sarasate, and others. The playing is gripping, original, and fully mature. Perhaps Heifetz lacked the intellectual probity of Szigeti, the glowing and gigantic (if sometimes rather glutinous) tone of Elman, and the sheer "olde world" charm of Kreisler. But he made up for these liabilities with performances of unparalleled technical accuracy (no tape splicing in those days), a sure sense of structure (each recording has its own Platonic perfection, with carefully delineated beginning, middle, and end), and what can only be described as the genesis of a modernist aesthetic. There is sentiment in abundance but little sentimentality; while Heifetz does not banish *portamento* altogether he uses it sparingly and he will not descend to histrionic manipulation. "When [Bruno] Walter comes to something beautiful, he melts," Toscanini once said, in a moment of exasperation. Heifetz never melts, but I can't imagine many 1990s listeners finding these records chilly. The passion is subtle, the artistic personality unusually self-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

effacing for its era. But both are present.

Throughout much of this century, we have placed an emphasis on what might be called all-purpose musicians; just recently has it become acceptable—indeed, outright fashionable—to specialize (note the careers of such current performers as John Eliot Gardiner and the Kronos Quartet). Heifetz, in common with other early "superstars" such as Toscanini and Horowitz, was not only expected to play *everything* but to play everything equally well—the Baroque and Classical repertories, the Romantic sonatas and concertos, a cautious smattering of contemporary music. In retrospect, through recordings, strengths and weaknesses have become apparent. It used to be heresy to suggest that Toscanini was generally a more convincing interpreter of Rossini and Verdi than he was of Beethoven and Brahms but, for many of us, when we judge from the recorded evidence, such is our conclusion. Likewise, I can affirm that the scores in which Heifetz is the most consistently reliable are those by what Virgil Thomson used to call "cold-climate composers," including music from Heifetz's native Russia.

For example, Heifetz recorded the Tchaikovsky Concerto three separate times—in 1937, with the London Philharmonic under Barbirolli; in 1950, with the Philharmonia under Walter Susskind, and, finally, in 1957, with the Chicago Symphony under Reiner. All of these performances have their excellences; the last boasts vivid recorded sound and the most virtuosic combination of orchestra and conductor (although I continue to find Heifetz's earliest reading of the solo part more dazzling and intrinsically poetic). Still, you can't go wrong with any of them; this is rich, haunting, melodic music, imbued with a gypsy warmth made all the more potent by Heifetz's refusal to milk it beyond its proper boundaries.

The Heifetz Collection contains two chimerical renditions of the Glazunov Concerto in A minor; only Michael Rabin, on EMI, is more moving, infusing the pyrotechnics with an ethereal sweetness (the disintegration and premature death of this violinist was nothing less than an artistic calamity). Heifetz's first recording of the Sibelius concerto, with Sir Thomas Beecham and the London Philharmonic Orchestra—appropriately cool and sometimes stern, yet always deeply felt and even seductive—has long been the standard by which other performances were judged and found wanting. (I would place Heifetz's 1959 interpretation, with the Chicago Orchestra and Walter Hendl, among the preterite.) There are two recordings of Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2, both with the Boston Symphony (Koussevitzky's conducting is rather more idiomatic than Munch's, although the sound is pallid by comparison). And there are numerous encore pieces—vignettes by Shostakovich, Khachaturian, Rachmaninoff, Glazunov, and Tchaikovsky, exciting and nostalgic by turn, inevitably given their full due.

Heifetz is also consistently top-drawer in what might be described as capital-V "Violin Music"—the works of Wieniawski, Vieuxtemps, Sarasate, Kreisler, and Paganini. Not all of these pieces are necessarily capital-A Art, but they provide heroic challenges for a violinist. Heifetz's command of his instrument is virtually flawless, of course, but he is not satisfied with mere athleticism. He never forgets that this is *music*, after all, and he plays it with neither undue grandiloquence nor flashy "Look at Me!" condescension. Pity the listener with heart so hard that the Bruch Concerto and "Scottish Fantasy" no longer stir a misty tenderness.

Heifetz's Bach was controversial, even before the early-music movement had established its strictures. The 1946 recording of the Concerto for Two Violins is a stunt—Heifetz plays both solo parts—and not a very successful one; the piece profits from two distinct personalities weaving around each other, in surprise and symbiosis. (A later reading, with Erick Friedman, one of Heifetz's rare students, is also less than persuasive.) Heifetz recorded all the solo sonatas and partitas in 1952; the performances

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

are fast, strenuous, bristling with nervous energy, and, to this taste, rather brutal. He places an emphasis on attacks and contrasts, to the detriment of line and continuity.

Some Bach performances from 1935 are more musical. Indeed, as a rule of thumb, when one has a choice between two competing Heifetz recordings of a given work, it is likely that the first version will be preferable. A case in point is the Mozart Concerto No. 5 in A (K. 219). Heifetz recorded this three times, in 1935, 1951, and 1963. The later performances have their strengths (and some of the weaknesses we find in the 1952 Bach solo pieces) but the 1935 recording (with Barbirolli) is sublime, from the unaccompanied, triadic entrance of the violin, so pure and serene that it seems to emanate from another plane of understanding—"above the battle," in Romain Rolland's phrase—through the cheerfully industrious reiterations of the concluding rondo. The central movement is particularly beautiful—long-breathed and exquisitely nuanced, with a grace and gentle stillness strangely enhanced by the burnished antiquity of the recorded sound.

It is unfortunate that Heifetz's only recording of Mozart's Divertimento in E-flat (K. 563) should have been made with the constrictions of the 78-RPM disc so obviously in mind. The performance—by Heifetz, William Primrose, and Emanuel Feuermann—is artful and lively (even though the tempos will sound stressed to latter-day listeners) but this is music that takes time to unfold, and the neglect of Mozart's indicated repeats diminishes it. Put another way, we need more than thirty-three minutes for this particular piece.

Heifetz was an uneven collaborator. The late series of Heifetz–Piatigorsky chamber concerts (with admirable musicians such as Primrose, Jacob Lateiner, and Leonard Pennario) are some of his worst records. A sense of hurry prevails, the Heifetz tone all too often takes on a wiry astringency, and on some occasions the playing is downright sloppy (a ghastly violin/cello arrangement of the Stravinsky "Suite Italienne" should never have been released). The 1961 performance of the Schubert "Cello" Quintet sounds uncomfortably like a disappointed violin concerto, as does a Mendelssohn octet dating from the same year. Heifetz's influence on his fellow musicians was sometimes baleful; Primrose made a spacious, elegant, and altogether cherishable recording of the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante (K. 364) with the American violinist Albert Spalding, but when he came to record this work with Heifetz, his playing was distinctly *agitato* (as was Heifetz's own) and the result might be described as "Dueling Fiddles."

Yet there are some marvelous collaborations in the Heifetz discography. I am especially fond of the Brahms Sonata in D minor (op. 108) that he recorded with the brilliant young American pianist William Kapell—two fiery temperaments in full force, relentlessly goading each other on, yet somehow maintaining a unified lyricism. (Heifetz and Kapell had planned to record all three Brahms sonatas; after Kapell was killed in a 1953 plane crash, the violinist lost interest in the project, and so Heifetz's way with op. 78 and op. 100 can only be imagined.) The piano-violin-cello trio recordings with Artur Rubinstein and Emanuel Feuermann (and, after Feuermann's death, with Gregor Piatigorsky)—Beethoven, Brahms, Ravel, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky—are empathic, honey-toned, and justly famous. If some of these "Million Dollar Trio" recordings are now period pieces—and they are definitely of their time and place—that period now seems a golden age, one that we may only look back upon with affection and wonder.

In general, Heifetz's recordings of Beethoven's ten sonatas for violin and piano are fleet, furious, charged with dramatic tension—"shot from guns," as the old advertising slogan might have had it. This manner is most effective in the later sonatas, with their inherent *Sturm und Drang*; I prefer a more genial, expansive, playful approach to early Beethoven, whose sense of humor has long been undervalued. Mention should be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

made of Heifetz's two principal accompanists, Emanuel Bay and the long-suffering Brooks Smith; the latter was a superb partner—necessarily deferential (throughout their twenty-year association, Heifetz never permitted Smith to call him by his first name) but always musical, always precisely *there*.

In this century, very few of our most celebrated performers have done much for the music of their time; the obvious exceptions—Koussevitzky, Stokowski, Rostropovich, Pollini—merely prove the rule. It was left to a young unknown named Louis Krasner to bring us the violin concertos of Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg, to Albert Spalding to commission (but not play) the Roger Sessions concerto and to play the first performance of the Samuel Barber concerto.

Still, several concertos were fashioned for, then played and recorded by Heifetz—pieces by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Louis Gruenberg, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Miklos Rózsa, and William Walton. The last of these is probably the best of the bunch (and it is the only one to have entered the repertory), although the Korngold and the Rózsa have a sumptuous "Hapsburg in Hollywood" majesty, and Heifetz's recording of the Gruenberg is rightly prized as an extraordinary example of violin velocity. Heifetz never recorded anything by Berg, Schoenberg, Webern, or Bartók; he played only minor works by Shostakovich, Milhaud, and Stravinsky; he may have been entirely unaware of the music of a newer generation of modernists. He did well by Ernest Bloch, however—wailing, rhapsodic performances of the two violin/piano sonatas—and he made one album of sonatas by Howard Ferguson and Karen Khachaturian (Aram's nephew) with his University of Southern California colleague Lillian Steuber.

The forty-sixth and final box in *The Heifetz Collection* deserves some special attention, for it was not only the violinist's last recording but his last public performance anywhere (October 23, 1972). The entire recital, a benefit for USC, was preserved, something that would have been unthinkable in 1917. Aside from that, the program—in both its planning and its execution—was not markedly different from one Heifetz might have offered decades before.

From the beginning of the Franck Sonata—rapt, centered, directly linear in its phrasing, immaculately aristocratic in its bearing—there can be no mistaking the artist. The Richard Strauss Sonata, a product of the composer's sixteenth year, follows immediately, and Heifetz brings pride and surging power to this brash youthful declaration of genius. Alfred Frankenstein, who was covering the concert for *The New York Times*, thought three movements of the Bach E-major Partita were "absolutely perfect"—and so they were, from Heifetz's subjective standpoint; certainly he does exactly what he wants to do with them, and purists be damned. And, finally, there are the encores, including Debussy's "La Plus que lente" (which Heifetz had first recorded back in 1925), some Bloch, Kreisler, Rachmaninoff, Ravel.

The same old stuff? Perhaps. But there is something noble about Heifetz's constancy. He knew what he wanted and he spoke his piece; if it was essentially the same piece at seventy-two that it was at seventeen, so be it. Few performing artists have exercised such meticulous control over their creative lives, in such a tumultuous era. (One wonders, sadly, whether a "new" Jascha Heifetz would be recognized by the record companies—would he be deemed hip enough? would he have the right hairdo? would he have "attitude"?) In any event, eight years after his death, Heifetz's life story can still be told in something like the "two lines" he gave to Deems Taylor. But *The Heifetz Collection* speaks volumes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The media

Hollywood values

by James Bowman

One of the two biggest media stories of the summer was the unexpected takeover by the Walt Disney Company of Capital Cities/ABC for $19 billion. The announcement, which came on July 31, upstaged an announcement the next day of Westinghouse's agreement to purchase CBS for an embarrassingly smaller amount of money. Although ABC has been in the entertainment business for as long as it has existed as a network, there seemed to many journalists something sinister and vaguely threatening to the seriousness and *gravitas* of ABC's widely respected news operations in the network's being owned by a corporate entity as essentially trivial as "The Mouse."

Benjamin R. Barber, a political scientist at Rutgers, for example, worried on the op-ed page of *The New York Times* that "the distinctions between information and entertainment, software and hardware, product and distribution are fading fast anyway," and that the corporate "synergy" prized in mergers like Disney/ABC is really "just another word for monopoly." Bill Kovach, curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, also got onto the op-ed page to complain that "ABC's news division will now have to compete with the enormous energy of Disney's entertainment productions in a company in which ABC's value as an outlet for entertainment is paramount."

More often, however, Disney's shrewdness in snapping up $19 billion worth of synergy earned a certain grudging admiration from the likes of Richard Turner in *New York* magazine and Ken Auletta in *The New Yorker*. Auletta, whose piece was called simply "Awesome," frankly gave the merger a rave review:

> As communications-company leaders become the objects of intense media attention, they assume the trappings of show business, entering a realm where they are judged as hits or flops, players or spectators. Michael Eisner didn't just want to do a deal. He wanted vindication. And, understandably, he wanted to be known as a winner again.

This he clearly is, since Auletta classes him among Tom Wolfe's "Masters of the Universe." Is broadcasting really that important? Clearly, media writers as a group think so. But Auletta also echoes the concerns of a number of journalists about the effect that having Disney in charge is likely to have on ABC's strong news operation:

> Eisner has no natural predilection for journalism. He tends to take a dim view of reporters; last week, he thanked several journalists for generally favorable pieces, as if they were choosing his side rather than just reporting his coup, and he tends to freeze out those whom he views as critics.

If, as Auletta says, the question on journalists' lips is "Does he care about the news

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

product, or only about profit margins?" it would not be remarkable—but it would also not be a question of quite so much purely journalistic interest as the journalists might imagine. When Times Mirror decided to close down *New York Newsday* two weeks earlier, the howls of outrage showed pretty conclusively which of those two things *they* cared about. There, too, a chief executive with no previous experience of the news business was blamed for not sharing the journalists' own opinion as to what Auletta calls, without apparent irony, the existing ABC management's "almost religious belief in the sanctity" of the news. Yet, as Jim Sleeper of *The New Republic* noticed about the paper's many obituaries, "the encomia revealed that it wasn't really 'the people' who'd lost a paper; it was liberal civic activists, academics and upscale 'diversity' enthusiasts."

Even Sleeper feels the need to get a dig in at Mark Willes, the C.E.O. at Times Mirror who used to earn his crust as a manufacturer of breakfast cereals: "If the future is bleak, it's because liberal cultural patronizers have joined with capitalist pitchmen to drive potentially great newspapers . . . into the past." It took *The Economist* to point out that, just maybe, the "capitalist pitchmen" might not be cruel "Masters of the Universe," arbitrarily deciding the fates of "potentially" great newspapers, but fallible human beings. In a leader debunking the enthusiasts of "synergy," the editors pointed out that the idea was born of Rupert Murdoch's successes with Fox but that such imitators as Time Warner, Sony/Columbia, and Matsushita/MCA have not found synergy working for them with Murdochian magic:

> Look closely at Mr. Murdoch's achievements and two things become clear. The first is that they are uniquely personal—based on the hunches of an unusual man who is happy operating in different countries and across different media. The second is that, although he practises some of what he preaches, his empire is actually founded not on combining different media but on taking huge gambles within separate ones, such as setting up the Fox TV-network in America or satellite TV in Asia. Mr. Murdoch's record is of opportunistic deals not great strategies, whatever he claims at conferences.

And indeed, the other big media story of the summer, Bob Dole's attack on Hollywood "values" and the ensuing uproar in the press, was closely bound up with what might be called the anti-synergy of Time Warner. It was the one company which Dole mentioned by name, and his attack on it came at the same time that William Bennett, the virtue man, and C. DeLores Tucker of the National Political Caucus of Black Women were improbably teaming up to nag the company's board about the nasty "gangsta rap" which some of its subsidiaries are heavily involved in producing. Rather untrue to form, *Time*, the company's flagship publication, made the issue its cover story in the following week. Not surprisingly, it was something less than a slashing attack on Time Warner, but it did prove an occasion for self-congratulation. In the words of Henry Muller, editorial director of Time Inc., "What makes the piece terrific is that we had the guts to write about an issue so close to the company."

Even the disgruntled ex-employee and author of *To the End of Time*, Richard Clurman, claims that "never in the history of the magazine have they run such a story"—though the explanation for it may have less to do with guts than with intestine warfare between Time Warner's far-flung divisions. Obviously straining to be measured and judicious in its rejection of Dole's criticisms, Richard Lacayo's cover story went so far as to express sympathy with parents who might be concerned by much of the product of popular culture:

> Though popular culture has a long and proud history of offending the squares, during the current decade it has particularly kept its sharpest edges to the front. Whatever is scabrous and saw-toothed and in-your-face is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> probably brought to you by the major labels and the big studios. For parents, the pervasive electronic culture can start to look like some suspect stranger who hangs around their kids too much, acting loutish, rude and drunk.

The suggestion of "start to look like" is that the stranger actually has a heart of gold and a fondness for children. Lacayo writes:

> To be sure, Dole's remarks were an unmistakable pitch to the culturally conservative wing of the Republican Party, which will have a lot to say about who becomes the next G.O.P. presidential candidate . . . But Dole's attacks resonate beyond the party faithful, in all senses of the word.

Well, there wouldn't be much point in them if they didn't. Lacayo proceeds to cite a poll rather in the way that politicians use study commissions: to get hotly controversial issues off their hands. The poll showed that 77 percent of people surveyed "were very concerned or fairly concerned about violence in the media; 70 percent said the same about media representations of sex." Hmm. Well, what do the experts think? Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council is quoted as saying: "If you expose children to uplifting and noble material, you're more likely to have noble citizens. If children are wallowing in sexual images and violence, that is bound to have an impact on those who are most vulnerable." Sound reasonable? Not if you ask Hollywood, which Lacayo proceeded to do. Oliver Stone called Dole's speech "a 90s form of McCarthyism"; the newly politically correct Clint Eastwood said: "I don't think the public is that stupid"; Norman Lear said that, in spite of being "turned off by the excesses in some films," he thought "Hollywood these days is making more pictures like *The Lion King* and *A Little Princess*."

Lacayo notes Dole's refusal to criticize Willis and Schwarzenegger or Rupert Murdoch, all Republican sympathizers, and points out that his speech was written by Mari Maseng, "wife of conservative columnist George Will." Most interestingly, however, he points out that:

> The violent and raunchy streak in civilization runs deep and long into the past. More teenage boys might be attracted to the classics if they knew about Homer's graphic descriptions of spear points ripping through flesh in *The Iliad* or the quarts of stage blood needed for any production of *Titus Andronicus*. As for sex, the lewd posturings in some paintings of Hieronymous Bosch would be rated NC-17 if they showed up at the multiplex.

None of this is true, by the way. Homer's description of violence, like his descriptions of most things, is more stylized than it is "graphic" and is always placed in some kind of moral context. There is nothing gratuitous about the bloodshed in Homer. This is also true of Shakespeare, whose modern producers it is, and not he, that insist on putting most of the bloody deeds of *Titus* on stage. Bosch is ribald in the way that Chaucer or Rabelais are, but he does not do voluptuous and suggestive air-brushed nudes for purposes of titillation.

Having established that the irreproachable culture-heroes of the past did the same thing as Oliver Stone and Ice T, however, Lacayo gets straight down to the political nitty-gritty:

> But the rise of capitalism over the past two centuries has meant that all the resources of technology and free enterprise could at last be placed at the disposal of the enduring human fascination with grunt and groan. By the early decades of the present century, there had emerged in the U.S. an entertainment industry that would eventually prove to be all-pervasive and ever more given to decking out our base impulses with sweaty and imaginative detail. It awaited only the youth culture that began stirring and shaking in the 1950s to take full advantage of the possibilities in rock, films, and TV. The result was a pop culture more pointed and grown up, but also more shameless and adolescent; sometimes both at the same time.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Having shifted the focus from Time Warner to the "entertainment industry" and the "pop culture" for which it caters (obviously vast social forces are at work and nothing so simple as a single moral agent can affect them much), he goes on to characterize Dole's attack once again as an opportunistic politician's response to the periodic outbreak of nervousness (understandable of course) which comes like an attack of hives occasionally to annoy baby-boomer parents.

Actually, Lacayo's making capitalism the villain serves a third purpose besides shifting the focus from Time Warner and establishing his own political position: it looks forward to the fatal flaw, as Lacayo sees it, in Dole's argument:

> Though the cultural-pollution issue looks like an easy win for the Republicans, it's not a clean sweep. As the debate develops in weeks to come, the soft spots in their arguments are likely to become more apparent. For a party committed to free-market principles—and which also wants to defund public television and end government oversight of the airwaves—a problem is that pop culture represents the free market at its freest, meaning most able to make a profitable pitch to the grosser appetites.

And he quotes Senator Bill Bradley: "The free market that the economic conservatives champion undermines the moral character that the social conservatives desire." This is of course nonsense. Blaming the non-moral mechanisms by which people contrive to satisfy their appetites, gross or otherwise, for the appetites themselves (nature's fault) or the decision to indulge them (the true object of moral concern) is just stupid—like shooting the messenger who brings you bad news. But then *Time* has for a long time been mining profits from the comfortable, liberal, middlebrow culture's appetite for a ragout of social-democratic platitudes with the news.

And then there are the Oklahoma City bombers, the militias, and the NRA, which Dole and all conservatives, Lacayo assumes, have to answer for. You'd never guess that the subject was originally the attack on Time Warner. On the contrary, it is Dole and Co. who are changing the subject "as a way to evade discussion of everything else that contributes to the fraying of American life, from threadbare schools to the flood of guns." Finally, Lacayo triumphantly returns to the *Time* poll, which is said to have revealed that

> Fifty-five percent of those questioned agreed that if candidates want to improve the nation's moral climate, there are more important issues to concentrate on than sex and violence in the entertainment industry.

Q.E.D.

Lacayo's piece was followed by a collection of points of view solicited from a range of commentators encompassing Lynne Cheney on the right and, well, just about everybody else on the left. Such natural supporters of Senator Dole as Donna Britt, Bill Bradley, and Stanley Crouch half-heartedly rallied round Mrs. Cheney and praised Dole with faint damns while John Edgar Wideman, Paul Schrader, Katha Pollitt, the music editor of *Vibe* magazine, and David Mamet were all wheeled out to pour vitriol on him and his "hypocritical," "appalling," "ugly," and "demagogic" opinions. To be fair, however, they were only echoing what large segments of the press not under the control of Time Warner were saying with even greater enthusiasm.

But the bravest piece of *Time*'s coverage of the controversy was Richard Zoglin's inside look at the corporate hierarchy, in which "company officials" were frequently quoted and their critics frequently not. Reassuringly, we were told that

> In one sense, Time Warner's role as the pop-culture world's designated lightning rod seems perfectly appropriate. As the world's largest media and entertainment conglomerate, the company is big enough to have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> multiple examples of virtually every product that might give people offense, from cheesy talk shows to loud heavy-metal bands. The fact that it is based in America (unlike many of its giant rivals, like Sony and Bertelsmann) makes it a compelling target.

Under the circumstances, those mysterious "company officials" pointed out,

> it is futile to try to stamp out rap by clamping down on a single company . . . "Obviously," says one senior Warner record executive, "if just Time Warner falls and commits hara-kiri, that will be great for people who hate the company. But it won't do anything to change what kids are exposed to. It will just shift profits from one company to another."

It is therefore perhaps not a coincidence that, as Zoglin reports, Gerald Levin, the company's chairman, "announced that the company would launch a drive to develop industry-wide standards for the distribution and labeling of potentially objectionable music." Failing that, Zoglin neglected to add, they could always fire Doug Morris, the head of domestic record labels and the main advocate of gangsta rap—as they promptly proceeded to do. Or they could try to find a buyer for Time Warner's 50 percent stake, acquired only months before, in Interscope Records, the label of most of the targets of Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Tucker—as it emerged they were doing two months later.

But perhaps the most revealing thing to appear in *Time* that week was a little sidebar written by Richard Schickel, *Time*'s film critic, offering what purports to be an authoritative but in fact very partial account of the films which Dole cited by name. Needless to say, all those Dole found "friendly to the family" Schickel finds (often with good reason) to be either morally and aesthetically repugnant or intellectually vacant, while the two which Dole called "nightmares of depravity"—*Natural Born Killers* and *True Romance*—get a better rating. *Natural Born Killers* actually supports Dole's argument, says Schickel, by attacking tabloid and sensationalist TV, while the "terrific" *True Romance*

> is, in fact, a wicked-smart argument in favor of family values. Sustained by their passion for each other (their sex life is anything but "loveless"), a deliriously innocent couple defeats every form of contemporary corruption and emerges in that most blessed of American states—millionaires contentedly cavorting on a beach with their pretty blond baby.

Now it is true that *Natural Born Killers* satirizes media sensationalism by taking its own sensationalism to ludicrous heights, but anyone who saw *True Romance* and thinks that the closing scene is meant to be read as other than tongue-in-cheek—exactly, by the way, like the last scene of *Natural Born Killers*—is missing something essential. Both films end with their heroes settling down to well-heeled domestic bliss as a postmodern way of thumbing the nose at filmic convention. We know it's all a fake anyway, so we might as well adopt the hokiest ending imaginable. Increasingly in Hollywood, film strives to represent not reality but other films, and its aim is not truth to life but a frankly acknowledged yet putatively entertaining illusion.

It is in fact this knowing, cynical quality which Dole, if he (or Miss Maseng) had been more of a critic, might have pointed to as the means by which "violence" and sex are purged of their moral contexts in the films not only of the depraved but also of the supposedly family-friendly types. By the end of the summer, the big story had moved on to a film called *Kids*—a loathsome and dishonest piece of trash financed, as no one should have been surprised to learn, by a subsidiary of none other than the Walt Disney Company. For once I feel inclined to agree with the self-serving moans and complaints of the narcissistic press: there's a bad time a-comin'.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

The last swinger

by James Wolcott

At the age of sixty-two, Philip Roth ought to have outgrown the role of *enfant terrible*, but he insists on giving it the old college try. His exhibitionism has a didactic streak. He's flashing us *for our own good*. Although the slick promotional brochure for *Sabbath's Theater*[1] pictures Roth looking distinguished and debonair, like a Dewar's Profile of the man of letters at leisure, the message of the book itself is that this literary success still hosts a wild man within. His latest antihero and designated sinner, Mickey Sabbath, is a horny geezer with a white beard. "Ascetic Mickey Sabbath, at it still into his sixties. The Monk of Fucking. The Evangelist of Fornication." Catching his estranged wife shacked up with a younger woman, he thumps his chest and roars like Tarzan the ape-man, shaking the entire house. A puppeteer in the Indecent Theater who missed his shot at the mainstream when he declined a job offer from Jim Henson ages ago (he ruefully notes that he "could have been inside Big Bird all these years"), Sabbath is a countercultural has-been hampered with arthritis—a condition symbolic not only of the artist no longer able to practice his craft but of the control freak losing his hold. Which doesn't stop him from trying to manipulate the other characters through a series of malicious pranks and head games (such as the nasty and labored humiliation of his mistress's husband). The herky-jerky movements of this book may be intended to mimic the way Sabbath regards the rest of humanity—as jangling marionettes—but Sabbath himself jumps and twitches from scene to scene as Roth, the master manipulator, jerks *his* strings. He's jerking the reader around, too.

The storyline to *Sabbath's Theater* is very simple. There isn't any. It's another personal-shambles novel from Roth, lashed along in his most garrulous, huffy, radio-blaring style. Loud aggravation has become his trademark. After the flamboyant excess of such early stories as "Defender of the Faith" and "The Conversion of the Jews," Roth's early novels *Letting Go* and *When She Was Good* slowly ground up yardage as he scrupulously recounted and inspected every domestic incident, analyzing his characters' psychological morass down to the last grain. His couples seemed attached by bitter necessity; they stayed together for the sake of the groceries. The novels' cramped integrity and hangdog realism was called "Dreiserian" by some, but where Dreiser's novels were a long horizontal accumulative crawl through the wealth and corruptions of the metropolis (the city is a dangerous lure, lying on the horizon like a showgirl on a platter), Roth's novels remained apartment-bound, agoraphobic. They seemed to take place on a single set.

His breakthrough came with *Portnoy's Complaint*, where Roth, who enjoyed a

1 *Sabbath's Theater*, by Philip Roth; Houghton Mifflin, 451 pages, $24.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

private reputation as an excellent mimic, loosened up at the mike and delivered a spiel that channeled Kafkaesque angst through a Jewish son's kvetch. The trauma of toilet training had found its poet laureate. In the novel's most hilarious chapter, "Whacking Off," his narrator masturbated like a machine-gunner. The urgencies of Alexander Portnoy's condition exploded traditional structure. The book was rushed and episodic, the brick-shaped paragraphs of his early work giving way to a page detonated with italics, bold caps, and exclamation marks. A phenomenal best seller, *Portnoy's Complaint* received the masterpiece treatment from reviewers ("a technical masterpiece," hedged Christopher Lehmann-Haupt), who compared Roth to Céline, Rabelais, Swift, and, of course, Lenny Bruce. They saw the novel as a primal scream that cleared the air—"the story finally ties together with the epiphanous neatness of any patient's last gestalt," Josh Greenfield reported in *The New York Times Book Review*. A few dissenters cited it as a brilliant piece of opportunism. As the critic Marvin Mudrick speculated, "Some years ago Roth got tired of being the most promising underpaid American writer and plugged into Chase Manhattan with *Portnoy's Complaint*, the first kosher pornographic novel." Aside from a Pinteresque exercise (*Deception*) and a dutiful pair of memoirs (*The Facts*, *Patrimony*), Roth has maintained a scratchy prose and a touchy persona. To my taste, he rose to genius in *My Life as a Man*, the definitive take on male paranoia, then exploited his notoriety with the tiresome gamesmanship of the Nathan Zuckerman novels.

Roth once told the writer David Plante, "Updike and Bellow hold their flashlights out into the world, reveal the real world as it is now. I dig a hole and shine my flashlight into the hole." Characteristically, then, the real world gets only a passing swipe in *Sabbath's Theater*—its protagonist spurns even keeping up with current events: "The news was for people to talk about, and Sabbath, indifferent to the untransgressive run of normalized pursuits, did not wish to talk to people." Roth does provide him with a hole to ponder, however. The black hole dominating this novel is the grave of Sabbath's dead mistress, Drenka. A dark Croatian from the Dalmatian coast, Drenka spouts endearing malaprops ("beating a dead whore . . . let him eat his own medicine . . . I have a bone to grind with you . . . crime doesn't pay off"—we're supplied with an exhaustive list) and is as dirty-minded as Roth's hero, no easy chore.

Of course, Drenka would have to be Eastern European to earn her wow status, for as any reader of Roth knows, his fictional American women are too pampered and uptight to give truly of themselves (such succubi are usually nutcases, e.g., "Monkey" in *Portnoy*); it takes a real woman to affirm the flesh, and Drenka is a real woman, a round woman, "her shape, at her heaviest, reminiscent of those clay figurines molded circa 2000 B.C., fat little dolls with big breasts and big thighs unearthed all the way from Europe down to Asia Minor and worshiped under a dozen different names as the great mother of the gods." She's all momma. When Sabbath licks her "uberous" breasts, he's "pierced by the sharpest of longings for his late little mother." Breaking Mary McCarthy's indoor record in *Intellectual Memoirs*, Drenka satisfies four men in a single day. Sabbath is awed. "The boldness with which she went after them! The ardor and skill with which she aroused them! The delight she found in watching them jerk off!" The regiment rides at dawn! After Drenka dies of cancer, former lovers masturbate on her grave in tribute. Picking up a bouquet of flowers left behind, Sabbath gets sticky hands from the semen spattered on their stems; licking it from his fingers, he chants before the full moon, "I am Drenka! I am Drenka!" And you thought fabulism was dead.

Drenka the everloving earth-mother is a recognizable type in the Roth *oeuvre*. Roth's women tend to fall into three categories: the implacable foe, inspired by Roth's fury

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of a first wife, who died in a car crash in 1968; the nympho dynamo, who presides as the narrator's number-one groupie; and the cultured pearl, modeled on Roth's second wife, the actress Claire Bloom. (In *The Professor of Desire*, the classy helpmate is even named Claire.) *Sabbath's Theater* features the implacable foe—Sabbath's wife, Roseanna—and the nympho dynamo—Drenka—but not the cultured pearl, for reasons to be explained later. Female will and appetite are thus amply represented, without any of the softening, consoling effects of simple companionship. Here there's no buffer zone between the baser instincts of Roth's men and women. Since the novel adopts Sabbath's perspective (it's a third-person novel that reads as if it were written in the first), the result is a disproportionate emphasis on his lecherous outlook. He can only relate to women as bodies, and those bodies are going to seed:

> Nothing quite touches Sabbath like these aging dishes with the promiscuous pasts and the pretty young daughters. Especially when they've still got it in them to laugh like this one. You see all they once were in that laugh. I am what's left of the famous motel fucking—hang a medal on my drooping boobs. . . .

. . . or pickled in their own juices.

> Whores. Played a leading role in my life. Always felt at home with whores. Particularly fond of whores. The stewlike stink of those oniony parts.

In a scene which recalls the ballplayer complaining about a woman's vaginal odor in Roth's *The Great American Novel* ("It stunk like somethin' that's been left out somewhere and turned green"), a cabdriver tells Sabbath a joke about a truckdriver who advises his wife to sleep with a skunk between her legs while he's gone. "So she says to him, 'What about the smell?' And he says, 'He'll get used to it. I did.' "

The carnality of *Sabbath's Theater* (involving threesomes, fancy dildos, phone sex, golden showers) rattles along like a boxcar of tainted meat. The frenzy into which Sabbath and Drenka plunge soon seems less a pleasurable tailspin than an extended bout of hysterics in which the bodies seem to hiccup. The sex is too stage-managed to be a turn-on. The panting gallop of the dialogue ("Oh! Oh! Oh! Mickey! Oh, my God! Ahh! Ahh! Ahh!") has a desperate quality, as if Roth were trying to get himself excited. He's writing neurotic erotica—neurotica.

To up the ante, to award Sabbath his devil horns, Roth has to contrive new outrages for this no-goodnik, such as forging a letter from his wife's dead father in hell (a devastating parody of psychobabble and the funniest coup in the book), or rummaging through the drawers of an old friend's daughter and trying to blackmail a pregnant cleaning woman. "If he slipped her the third fifty, would she just slide to her knees as easily as when she prayed? Interesting if she prayed and blew him at once. Happens a lot in Latin countries." Of course, it's only a matter of time before Sabbath gets his comeuppance, or at least a stern talking-to. Once the old friend, Norman by name, finds a pair of his daughter's panties stashed in Sabbath's pocket, he launches into a too-pat lecture which reads as if the ghost of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* were wagging his finger at Mr. Self-Indulgence. "You live in the failure of this civilization. The investment of everything in eroticism. The final investment of everything in sex. And now you reap the lonely harvest. Erotic drunkenness, the only passionate life you can have." Norman expands this bill of indictment:

> "The walking panegyric for obscenity," Norman said. "The inverted saint whose message is desecration. Isn't it tiresome in 1994, this role of rebel-hero? What an odd time to be thinking of sex as rebellion. Are we back to Lawrence's gamekeeper? At this late hour? To be out with that beard of yours, upholding the virtues of fetishism and voyeurism. To be out with that belly of yours, championing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> pornography and flying the flag of your prick. What a pathetic, outmoded old crank you are, Mickey Sabbath. The discredited male polemic's last gasp. Even as the bloodiest of all centuries comes to an end, you're out working day and night to create an erotic scandal. You fucking relic, Mickey! You fifties antique! Linda Lovelace is already light-years behind us, but you persist in quarreling with society as though Eisenhower is president!" But then, almost apologetically, he added, "The immensity of your isolation is horrifying. That's all I really mean to say."

It's at moments like this that one realizes that the strength of a Roth novel, like that of a John Osborne play, depends on the rhetorical roll and spleen of the monologues, since there's seldom any genuine dialogue or casual exchanges in Roth's fiction, only speeches recited by the yard. Roth's humor works one-way, too. It's nearly always the fuming Roth spokesman who gets the laughs, while the other party functions as conscience, reality principle, scold. No matter how many times a Roth hero is told off, he's soon back on his hobbyhorse. He has too much invested in his ongoing snit-fit to take advice at this late stage, and is too set in his ways to meet new people. Who needs people when you have all these problems to keep you company? Since *Portnoy's Complaint*, Roth's heroes have been one-note prima donnas, isolated from society in Roth's force field of fame. (From his interviews, you draw the impression that Roth only relates to other writers.)

The novel takes a few rest stops of reminiscence as Mickey Sabbath pays a nostalgic call on his old neighborhood and meets some old colorful characters and opens the carton containing his dead brother Morty's personal effects, all of which only serves to remind him what a louse he is. Morty, shot down during World War II at the age of twenty, is a reminder of his own lost innocence. In a moment meant to bring out the violins, Mickey wraps himself in Morty's old forty-eight-star flag and weeps in the mist. Sabbath knows he isn't someone who will be missed and mourned. He envisions his own tombstone:

> Morris Sabbath
> "Mickey"
> Beloved Whoremonger, Seducer,
> Sodomist, Abuser of Women,
> Destroyer of Morals, Ensnarer of Youth,
> Uxoricide,
> Suicide
> 1929–1994

But even this self-indictment betokens an inflated ego. His suicide threat is an empty boast. As we learn in the book's final paragraph, Sabbath can't bring himself to take what Hemingway called the Big Out. "He could not fucking die. How could he leave? How could he go? Everything he hated was here."

Hate is an emotion that Roth holds dear. It stimulates him, keeps his mind humming, this militant spite. His misanthropy runs even deeper than his misogyny. It isn't the disgust with the dumb herd seen in Céline and Wyndham Lewis; Roth's contempt isn't as gut-level or all-encompassing. His misanthropy expresses itself as a supersensitivity toward the petty infractions made against his acute spirit. Roth has said that every writer feels he is right, but few have acted as wronged as Roth (that's why that tired pun "the gripes of Roth" persists—he's his own grievance committee). The slyest triumph of Roth's career is how he's converted his righteousness into capital, depicting himself as embattled, maligned, misunderstood, while enjoying more favor than almost any American writer alive. His first book, *Goodbye, Columbus*, was praised by the elders—Bellow, Leslie Fiedler, Irving Howe, and Alfred Kazin—and won the National Book Award and *The Paris Review*'s Aga Khan award. He has won the National Book Critics Circle Award twice, for *The Counterlife* and *Patrimony*. Even satires, like his baseball burlesque *The Great American Novel* and his anti-Nixon lampoon *Our Gang*, had admirers.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Portnoy's Complaint drew hostile attention, but Roth's dismay smacked of bad faith. He wrote a novel intended to shock and offend, then was perturbed when some readers were shocked and offended. Roth seems to need to feed off of negative notices as an excuse to back himself into a corner and counterpunch. Where an Updike novel, for example, seems to drop out of its own special cloud, the latest Roth novel seems like a response to the reaction to the previous Roth. After Irving Howe published a reconsideration of Roth in *Commentary* which contained the lethal putdown that the cruellest thing one could do to *Portnoy's Complaint* was read it twice, Howe was hung out to dry in *The Anatomy Lesson*. To Roth's credit, his tirade against Howe is very funny and exact, especially when he tees off on the sentimentality of Howe's immigrant saga *World of Our Fathers*.

> The comedy is that the real visceral haters of the bourgeois Jews, with the *real* contempt for their everyday lives, are these complex intellectual giants. They *loathe* them, and don't particularly care for the smell of the Jewish proletariat either. All of them are full of sympathy suddenly for the ghetto world of their traditional fathers now that the traditional fathers are filed for safekeeping in Beth Moses Memorial Park. When they were alive they wanted to strangle the immigrant bastards to death because they dared to think they could actually be of consequence without ever having read Proust past *Swann's Way*. And the ghetto—what the ghetto saw of these guys was their heels: out, out, screaming for air, to write about great Jews like Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Dean Howells. But now . . . it's where oh where's the inspired orderliness of those good old Hebrew school days? Where the linoleum? Where's Aunt Rose?

No individual seems to have lodged in Roth's craw for this novel. The discontent seems more generally dispersed. According to an article in *The New York Observer*, Roth was depressed by the poor reception to his previous novel, *Operation Shylock*. The book was praised by some "name" critics (Kazin, Harold Bloom), it won the PEN/Faulkner Award, but sales were weak. His disappointment is understandable—the first two-thirds of *Operation Shylock* are a bold feat—but his behavior afterward seemed disproportionate. Roth broke up with Claire Bloom (her absence is so pronounced in *Sabbath's Theater*, it's as if she's been banished), and changed publishers. *Sabbath's Theater* is shot through with the attitude that Sabbath (and Roth) feels discarded and passé. "When I got written up in *The Nation* for taking a tit out on the street [an incident which Sabbath recounts at tedious length] I was their noble savage for a week. Today they'd excoriate my balls off for so much as thinking about it, but in those days that made me heroic to all right-thinking people. Dissenter. Maverick. Menace to society. Great."

Now he's lost his cachet as a novelty act, and his audience as well. *I do and do for you people—and this is the thanks I get!* The novel ends with a virtuoso finale as Sabbath attempts to baptize Drenka's memory by urinating on her grave (a hosing as copious and enriched with significance as the epic pee Norman Mailer took in *Armies of the Night*), only to be caught in a police car's spotlight: ". . . he was fixed in the spotlight as though he were alone among the tombstones to perform a one-man show, Sabbath star of the cemetery, vaudevillian to the ghosts, front-line entertainer to the troops of the dead. Sabbath bowed." Then, like a vaudevillian, he's dragged away from the scene—given the hook.

In *Sabbath's Theater*, Sabbath is pissing on the past and making profane slapstick comedy out of his own mortal dread. Drenka's grave is a doorway to Sabbath's own grave, which doubles as Roth's. Sabbath/Roth immerses himself in the complete syllabus of death literature, reading "book after book about death, graves, burial, cremation, funerals, funerary architecture, funeral inscriptions, about attitudes toward death

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over the centuries, and how-to books dating back to Marcus Aurelius about the art of dying." Given Roth's age and range of afflictions (in recent years alone, he's suffered from bouts of depression, dependency on Halcion and Xanax, undergone a knee operation and a quintuple bypass), it's natural that he himself would be death-haunted. (John Updike, born a year before Roth, sifts through the shadows in his recent collection *The Afterlife*.) And given the lurid coloring of Roth's talent, it's absurd to expect stoic reserve from him at the prospect of extinction, or a wholesome change of heart. For all its narrator's ailments, *Sabbath's Theater* possesses a haranguing energy that make younger writers like Richard Ford and Michael Chabon look as if they're pulling plows. But the novel is so narrow in its obsessions, so petty and overwrought, that its author seems to be wringing himself dry, choking off his last drops of juice. His flashlight gets stuck in the hole. Yet it's too early to consign Roth to the remainder bin. These days, sixty-two isn't so old. He's managed to stretch his midlife crisis this far. He may mature yet!

Minding the revolution

Mark Polizzotti
Revolution of the Mind:
The Life of André Breton.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 754 pages, $35

reviewed by Stephen Sartarelli

Despite his central role in one of the most influential of modern art movements, André Breton, the "pope of Surrealism," poet, essayist, polemicist, and intellectual agitator, has long remained an enigmatic and somewhat elusive figure. This seems all the more surprising when one considers that he lived out most of his life in public—in "a glass house," to use his own words, and in a "glass bed, with glass sheets."

In part this elusiveness has been owing to the fact that, until recently, much of the documentation of his more intimate life has not been available to researchers. (Indeed, the correspondence between Breton and poet-novelist Louis Aragon—dear friend and early Surrealist collaborator until the latter fully embraced Stalinism in 1932, after which Breton never spoke to him again—still remains under lock and key.) It also stems from the fact that Breton's "public" self—as standard-bearer of Surrealism, but also as the first-person voice of the many prose works that combine essay, autobiography, lyric flights, and philosophical speculation—was actually a carefully crafted persona revealing very little of the real man, the charismatic if choleric leader who, despite his fierce and often arbitrary fulminations against fellow-Surrealists and friends, commanded, at least up to a point, their loyal and loving respect. But perhaps for more than any other reason, Breton's character has defied posterity's full comprehension because of the profound contradictions at the very heart of the man, contradictions which he indeed cultivated as part of his "artistic research" but probably understood far less than he believed.

Mark Polizzotti's new biography, *Revolution of the Mind*, admirably dispels much of the mist surrounding the figure of Breton and gives us a splendidly clear picture of the man himself. In a richly documented, seamlessly composed narrative that is as engrossing as it is informative, Polizzotti has brilliantly succeeded in filling in many of the lingering gaps in our knowledge of the life of one of the seminal cultural figures of our troubled century. Interweaving Breton's personal and intellectual involvements with the passions, polemics, and shenanigans of the complex and colorful bohemian milieu of Paris from Dada to the eve of World War II (and then to the more subdued cultural world of postwar Paris), the author paints a broad, sweeping canvas of the age while taking care to present all of Breton's relationships and conflicts from as many sides as possible, never intervening to pass judgment or to defend his subject, but rather letting all the circumstances and principal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

parties speak for themselves. If the best biographies go beyond mere advocacy or enmity to present, as much as possible, the full human complexity of their subjects, with all their foibles and virtues, then Polizzotti, with this, his first book, has given us an exemplary model of the art.

And Breton's foibles, like his virtues, certainly make for an interesting tale. Born in 1896 in Tinchebray, Normandy, the only child of an unambitious lower-middle-class father and a strict, zealously churchgoing mother of the same social milieu, André Breton appeared to be on his way to a medical career after proving an unexceptional, if at times highly promising, student. He had also shown a keen interest in poetry from early adolescence, but since his eye was above all for poets marginally or not yet fully accepted into the French canon, especially the *poètes maudits*—Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud—he had no particular incentive to undergo the classical, humanistic education usually given to those with a literary bent, and opted for a more science-based training. The literary pursuits continued unabated, however, and as soon as he went to Paris in 1913 for his P.C.B. certificate—a standard, year-long science program preliminary to medical studies—he got in touch with Symbolist poet Paul Valéry, then forty-two years old but not yet the national celebrity he would soon become. The older poet was suitably impressed with the "Mallarméan" poems of the seventeen-year-old and encouraged him duly, but it wasn't long before the opportunistic Breton also sought out and won the approval of another prominent poet of the time, Guillaume Apollinaire, champion of Cubism and other avant-garde causes and future inventor of the term "Surrealism."

Breton was obviously playing both sides of the fence, in a manner that he himself would later refuse to tolerate in his associates. But his heart was really with "the new," and though he would continue for a while to write "symbolist" poems, his propensity for radical experimentation, in art as well as life, would soon become manifest. Meanwhile the Great War had broken out, and in his experience in the army medical corps he made friends with a patient named Jacques Vaché, a dandyish young nihilist of the sort cropping up all over Europe at the time, whose snide intolerance of art and literature—he mockingly called the poetically inclined Breton *le pohète*—deeply impressed and influenced Breton for the rest of life. Indeed, though Vaché died only a few years later of an opium overdose—an event that probably determined Breton's lifelong, resolute intolerance of drug use—the memory of the young soldier would forever remain a kind of inner, other self for Breton, who created for his lost friend a legend and a posterity that Vaché clearly would never have otherwise enjoyed.

Breton would soon find an echo of Vaché's anti-art nihilism in the nascent Dada movement and its anarchic leader, Tristan Tzara, whose favor he was quick to solicit, and whom he labored hard to persuade to bring his Zurich-born "enterprise" to Paris. Quickly bored with Valéry's middle-aged conservatism-cum-rationalism, and dismayed by the newfound French nationalism of the foreign-born Apollinaire (of Polish and probably Italian parentage), the young Breton was looking for other contemporaries to share his peculiarly subversive understanding of literature; for him, both Valéry and Apollinaire still subscribed to *l'art pour l'art*, while he envisioned a poetry that would, as in Rimbaud's words, *changer la vie*. By this time he had already met future fellow-Surrealists and soul mates Philippe Soupault and Louis Aragon, and with them had founded, in 1919, the ironically named review *Littérature*. Breton and his co-editors opened their pages to Tzara's group, but also to some of the "rear guard" (including Valéry and Gide), in addition to publishing their own attempts at "experimental" verse (mostly word-collages) and polemical essays in support of Dada.

But the generally playful, satirical Tzara, a Romanian Jew by birth, and the moody, rather humorless Breton, who hailed from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one of the gloomier corners of France, were clearly cut from different cloth and often clashed over the direction each felt that Paris Dada should take. The collaboration did not last long. For despite his "anti-literary" stance, Breton yearned for something more than Dada's absolute mockery of art, and already began to make his break in 1920, though the final rift didn't occur until 1922, on the occasion of the disastrous "Congress of Paris," which he had organized to debate the current positions of the literary and artistic avant-gardes.

The medical studies, though little more than a fond memory at this point, were not without echo in Breton's literary endeavors. Indeed, Breton's only real interest in the medical profession had always been for the fledgling psychiatric field, and this had led him to the writings of Freud and of the French psychoanalyst Pierre Janet, whose ideas informed his wartime dealings with soldiers suffering from traumatic ailments caused by the new means of warfare. His experience with Janet's methods of using verbal automatism as therapy, and the remarkable things that patients said when practicing it, had led him to believe that it had great poetic and even metaphysical potential as a means for liberating man from the constraints of what he saw as outdated and repressive cultural, social, and literary norms. The application of automatism to writing thus yielded, in 1920, the book-length collaboration with Philippe Soupault called *Les Champs magnétiques* ("The Magnetic Fields"), considered by most to be the first Surrealist text.

Believing they had made a major discovery, Breton and Soupault communicated their enthusiasm to Aragon and their other associates, who now included Benjamin Péret and Paul Eluard. In the next few years, then, riding the crest of the excitement generated by the novelty of automatic writing and by experiments in such still current psychoanalytic practices as hypnotically induced sleep—here used to "creative" ends—this group of poets would form the first Surrealist nucleus. Taking their literary cues from such contemporaries as Apollinaire and Pierre Reverdy and such predecessors as Rimbaud, Alfred Jarry, and Lautréamont (whose series of nightmarish prose poems, *Les Chants de Maldoror*, would assume an almost scriptural importance for Breton), the Surrealist poets thus already had a powerful head of steam when Breton wrote the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924, published that same year together with his most impressive automatic text, *Poisson soluble* ("Soluble Fish").

The *Manifesto* is probably the best known of Breton's works. It was written in the middle of a very fertile period for him, coming just after the poetry collection *Clair de terre* ("Earthlight"), which features many of the new Surrealist techniques, and the essay collection *Les Pas perdus* ("The Lost Steps"), and coming one year before the establishment of the hyperbolically named review *La Révolution surréaliste*, of which he was chief editor.

It is this, Surrealism's early, "heroic" age—which would last until 1930, after weathering a few storms—that to me has always seemed the most fecund, the most innocent, the most unmarred by the darker side of Breton's personality. For the moment, anyway, the Surrealist idea, while guided by Breton and following his lead, clearly transcended and exceeded his directives, forming a vast, fluid whole capable of accommodating a broad range of literary and artistic talents and personalities, including Robert Desnos, Paul Eluard, Antonin Artaud, and André Masson. With their fixation on the themes of love, liberation, fantasy, and dream, the Surrealists were the Romantics of modernism, bringing new passion to a literary culture long beclouded by the pessimism of *fin-de-siècle* decadence and the nihilism that had followed it.

Polizzotti takes us inside the day-to-day developments of this whirlwind of events, showing how Breton's catalytic role in the movement lay not only in establishing the theoretical foundations of Surrealism but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

also in acting on a keen sense of strategy and an ability to create scandal among an already jaded public. Many of the Surrealists' antics—disrupting other art manifestations, beating up opponents, provoking minor riots—may seem appalling to us now, the stuff of rowdy schoolboys hardly worthy of being called artists. What is perhaps more problematic, however, and somewhat taken for granted in Polizzotti's narrative, is that such behavior actually had a certain "pedigree" by the time Surrealism came along, and that, despite its ability still to arouse indignation, it was, at least by some standards, "normal": not only had notorious precedents been set by the Futurists in Italy and the Dadaists in Zurich, Berlin, and Paris; there was also the much more ominous example being set by the "freelance" political groups of the time—Mussolini's thugs, and later Hitler's, as well as various anarchist and Communist groups—who seldom hesitated to use force to break up opponents' rallies or intimidate individuals who refused to be cowed.

It was in fact in those first heady years of avant-garde success that Surrealism, ever true to Breton's premise that the movement must reach beyond art and into the sphere of direct action, began its long and unfruitful flirtation with Communism. If this political involvement, the source of many of the disputes and rifts that would riddle the Surrealist group in the future, brought out some of Breton's most tyrannical tendencies, it also, paradoxically, brought out some of his better qualities. From the start a strained relationship, the Surrealists' courtship of the Communists would linger for some seven years, while Breton persevered in his attempts to convince them of the Revolution's need for his particular vision of "art." But what the Communists found hardest to stomach was precisely Breton's insistence on the liberation of man's "inner world" as well as his stubborn emphasis on the independence of the artist to conduct his search for man's liberation as he saw fit. To them, indeed, the proletariat really had no need for artists, and Breton, in particular, they saw as little more than a troublesome anarchist.

By 1930, however, Breton had consolidated his grip on the Surrealist group through a series of "excommunications," most of which were politically motivated. Usually the guilty parties were perceived as being too concerned for their "careers" or material circumstances—as was the case with Desnos, who by now had also had the temerity to write some poetry in verse. Breton's intransigence in such matters seemed to many particularly hypocritical at this time, since he, unlike they, at least had a major publisher (Gallimard) to print his works. The contradiction in Breton's behavior was further highlighted by his continuing insistence on the independence of the artist in his ongoing involvement with the Left, while in his dealings with the Surrealists he jealously resented any hint of individual independence from the group. The *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930) is colored by the vitriol and vindictiveness that marked this period of Surrealism, and lacks the playful spirit of the first manifesto. The *Second Manifesto* also marks a further rapprochement with the Left, a short-lived and unsuccessful experiment that saw the movement's "organ," *La Révolution surréaliste*, reborn as *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*. Engineered to a large extent (though as ever with Breton's approval) by Aragon, who by this point had joined the Party, this phase would end with the latter's "excommunication" in 1932.

A further paradox in Breton's behavior is that what at first looks like ruthless political maneuvering at the expense of long-cherished friendship—the priority he gave, in Polizzotti's terms, to "ideological friendship" over "affective friendship"—sometimes ends up looking like principled bravery when all is said and done. The friendship with Aragon is a case in point. Once Aragon had left Surrealism, his loyalty to Communism was as staunch as it earlier had been to Breton, and he was loath to criticize Stalin even at the time of the show trials and purges. Still, it is strangely he, and later

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eluard—who left Surrealism behind for Communism at the onset of World War II, never to look back—who appear the more human in their obvious anguish over losing their lifelong friend Breton, who for his part seems unable to see a difference of opinion as anything other than a personal affront.

But whether this sort of valuation of ideas over human sentiment is not perhaps a version of the same fanaticism under whose fire and metal so many have fallen in our century remains a question whose answer lies beyond this remarkable account of Breton's life and times. For the path he traveled indeed lies strewn with the lives of those he sacrificed to his ideas. From the banished friends to the wives and lovers whose human frailties may have ill-disposed them to fleshing out the fluid Ideal on which it appears his very identity depended, the people he left by the wayside during his life often corresponded very closely to the particular personal obsession they were each supposed to embody or illustrate at the time. This is especially true of the women inspiring the prose works *Nadja* (1927), *The Communicating Vessels* (1932), and *Arcanum 17* (1944). The case of "Nadja," the half-mad waif who so briefly captured Breton's fascination as the embodiment of the Surrealist ideal of freedom and the rejection of conventional bourgeois life, is particularly poignant in Polizzotti's account of it. It is as if the work itself, and the objectification of the person in it, at last make off with the spirit and life of the living being. And Breton's callous insensitivity and ultimate indifference to the tragic consequences of his actions in this case cast a pall over what in his telling is a rather charming, faintly sad story.

Yet it is at least in part this talent for objectifying, even mythifying, personal experience that makes Breton's story a tale worth telling. Early on he made a habit of giving universal, symbolic meaning to the conflicts and triumphs of his life, in a kind of metaphysical megalomania that at once lent lyric power to day-to-day experience and pro-

POV

TELEVISION WITH A POINT OF VIEW

P.O.V.'s submission deadline for its ninth season is Sept. 1. Independent nonfiction films are sought for the annual 10-week series. All styles of nonfiction films are eligible for submission, including video diaries, poetic narration, cinema verite, compilation, traditional documentaries, and experimental non-narrative approaches. Producers almost finished with a production but lacking financing may apply for completion funds. Call immediately for guidelines and application: 212.989.8121.

Back issues of
The New Criterion
are for sale at $6 each.

A list of highlights
is available upon request
from the Office Manager.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

vided the lyric impulse with ready raw material. It also enabled him to incorporate within his own vision whatever ideas, styles, attitudes, or beliefs he deemed fit to inform his poetic and philosophical ideals, regardless of whether he ultimately rejected or embraced the source. Most important, perhaps, it lent a power of conviction and vehemence to the underpinnings of the Surrealist idea as he defined it: the belief in the possibility of dissolving the fundamental antinomies of life as conceived in the Western tradition—subjective vs. objective, transcendence vs. immanence, dream vs. waking—through passion, desire, love, and the agency of an art that would express the spirit directly, unmediated by logic, reason, or the critical sense.

It is no doubt this idea and the special urgency and singlemindedness with which Breton communicated it that attracted so many artists from around the world to his circle, ever ready to expose themselves to the hazards of his association so that they might subscribe to a vision that promised the fruits of otherworldliness without the usually requisite rigors of belief in a transcendent being. But it was also this same sort of monomania that ultimately limited the farthest extent of Breton's own achievement to having *suggested* a possible metaphysics of art and action beyond other available models.

For Breton, too, may have been a victim of the singlemindedness with which he clung to his idea of Surrealism. The figure he cuts in Paris after the war, trying desperately to revive the same atmosphere of agitation, the same obligatory, tiresome café meetings, the same banishments and intimidations (though somewhat more restrained now), elicits nothing so much as pity. If only he had been able to temper his scorn for the image of the "man of letters" and let himself contemplate, *as a writer*, the concepts and passions driving his ambitions, he might have found a trace of the detachment so often propitious to the development of ideas beyond their initial state of fascination. Perhaps then might he have come closer to a true "revolution of the mind," at least in his writing. As it is, it is still no small feat to have indicated, albeit at some cost to himself and others, the potential for renewal within ourselves.

War stories

Samuel Hynes, Anne Matthews, Nancy Caldwell Sorel & Roger J. Spiller, advisory editors
Reporting World War II.
Part One: American Journalism 1938–1944. 914 pages.
Part Two: American Journalism 1944–1946. 977 pages.
The Library of America, $35 each

reviewed by Philip Terzian

If bad novels make good movies, it may stand to reason that good wars make bad prose. That, at least, is one conclusion the reader may draw from this copious collection of pieces, vignettes, essays, and polemics gleaned from the journalism of the Second World War. It may also be seen as a kind of cultural regression: in observing the fiftieth anniversary of the war's conclusion, the editors of the Library of America chose journalism, not literature, as their emblematic form. They may have had no choice. In assembling an anthology of war fiction, after all, they would be scraping a shallow barrel: Cozzens, Wouk, Mailer, Jones—leavened, perhaps, with some military memoirs.

So here we have two thick volumes of what journalists like to call "the first rough draft of history." On the whole, they make for wearying reading. There is no question that many men and some women took extraordinary risks, and sometimes lost their lives, to report the war from its various fronts, to bring the battlefields home to America. But let's not evade the issue: their sacrifice was largely for commerce, not art, and access paid the dividends. First rough draft, indeed: the rhetoric here is not for the ages, but for birdcages.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Of course, there are exceptions. But first, let us survey the landscape, and find out where we are. War reporting is largely divided between those who seek to duplicate the experience of combat and those who see a World in a Grain of Sand. The latter group, on the whole, is more successful. This may largely be due to the fact that language can insinuate, but cannot quite communicate, the substance of war. Battles, after all, are a fog of sensation, a cinematic roar, not a sequence of ideas, or instructive tale. The explosions right and left, the flying body parts, the thunderous noise, the nervous expectation—packed into paragraphs, the horror and banality are bewildering, not enlightening. The conscientious reporters—Robert Sherrod in the Pacific, for example, or Homer Bigart in Italy—cannot help but be consumed by their stories, by details upon details, by the numbing succession of startling events. Sherrod, in particular, writes with a kind of ill-suppressed hysteria. His fury at the Japanese, his anxious excitement, his shock, remorse, and exhaustion nearly fly off the page and throttle the reader. It's impressive, in its way, but perplexing to read, and palls in time.

The reporter who avoids the big picture and settles, instead, for the cautionary snapshot is easier to swallow. The supreme practitioner of this minor art, of course, was Ernie Pyle, who, very nearly alone among his colleagues, retains some semblance of a writer's reputation. It is not difficult to see why. Pyle tended to leave strategy to others, concentrating instead on the homely distractions of citizen-soldiers. World War II was not the first mass mobilization of American fighting men, but it was the first to be covered by the mass media. Pyle assumed, probably correctly, that most newspaper readers would be either bored or confused by intricate weaponry and amphibious tactics; he settled, instead, for the joys and discomforts of yeomen at war. Being a creature of his times, he preferred heroics to neuroses, and frequently lapsed into bathos and schmaltz. But his prose has a kind of refreshing directness, and he wrote about what he saw instead of what he felt, or kept his feelings to a minimum. In that sense, his limited talent served him well. His simple drawings are more vivid than Bigart's giant canvases, his plain speech more eloquent. If this introduces Pyle to a generation of journalists, so much the better.

Still, any anthology is more than the sum of its parts, and invites speculation about how it was assembled. In this instance, there are certain contemporary trends: affirmative action, for one. Some of the better-known war reporters (William L. White comes to mind) are excluded altogether or given short shrift, in order to make room for more women than expected. Too bad, really. The proportion of female to male reporters in World War II cannot have been as high as it is here; at any rate, some of the women reporters are appalling. Janet Flanner's mannered style will appeal to those who yearn for the old *New Yorker*, and Marguerite Higgins was surely as distinguished as her rival Homer Bigart. But it is painful to grope through Martha Gellhorn's prose: awkward, immature, muddled, boastful—no wonder she and Hemingway divorced—and Helen Lawrenson at the death camps, Lee Miller in Normandy, Virginia Irwin in Berlin, and (on the home front) Susan B. Anthony II and Mary Heaton Vorse are embarrassing to read.

Surprisingly, in our armchair age, there is very little of what we would now call analysis. There is an interesting review of the Italian campaign advanced by Eric Sevareid in *The Nation*, a taut, relentless, unconventional tract that questions the premise of Churchill's Mediterranean strategy. The editors, of course, could not include punditry in a book of reportage, but pieces like Sevareid's, written past the outskirts of military censorship, are frequently as pertinent as on-the-site reporting. And saddening too, when compared to his subsequent network incarnation. At any rate, let us be grateful for small favors: Sevareid's radio-TV colleague, the portentous Walter

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cronkite, is nowhere to be found here.

Two glittering celebrities, however, are in evidence: William L. Shirer and Edward R. Murrow. If these two volumes do nothing else, they may put those soaring reputations in perspective. Shirer's Berlin diary, which seems to have been revised and annotated with greater care even than Mary Chesnut's, sounds ludicrous to modern ears. His judgments are not just easily predicted, but juvenile in tone, and painfully hackneyed in final execution: Chamberlain pulls a "clever face-saving stunt," Daladier is a "beaten and broken man," heel-clicking Germans swagger and gloat, cynical colleagues snicker and grin, only William L. Shirer perceives the awful truth. Murrow's famous radio broadcasts from London, when reduced to cold type, very nearly push the reader to the side of the Luftwaffe. His solemn intonations—"This . . . is London, at three-thirty in the morning," or "I'm standing on a rooftop looking out over London"—drag us to a series of picturesque banalities: "What the policeman was doing there, I don't know. He may be there still." Or: "In front of Buckingham Palace there's a bed of red and white roses—untouched—the reddest flowers I've ever seen." Hearing is believing.

Other famous names may be found. E. B. White journeys to San Francisco to cover the founding conference of the United Nations in his choicest whimsical style. For White, of course, the apparent establishment of World Government must have been a kind of religious experience: "The atmosphere," he says, "was that of a cathedral." All the appropriate notes are struck. Molotov, executioner of millions, is "direct . . . and seems to possess unlimited endurance, both physical and mental . . . never ruffled, never doubtful," even when assailed by a skeptical press. Stettinius, the American Secretary of State,

> tries hard to develop an easy manner . . . but it doesn't always come off. . . . When he is being needled . . . he leans forward over the table, thrusts an ear out to catch the question, licks his lips as he prepares to reply, and clearly shows embarrassment if he is withholding information for diplomatic reasons.

Stettinius would benefit from Molotov's directness.

There are some pleasant surprises. Ernest Hemingway recounts his approach to Paris with an uncharacteristic self-deprecating note. Told that the French general Leclerc is anxious to meet him, he strides toward his admirer with a pair of boon companions: "His greeting—unprintable—will live in my ears forever. 'Buzz off, you unspeakables,' the gallant general said." John P. Marquand, on a battleship off Iwo Jima, recounts the invasion from the sidelong perspective of the officers' bridge: a kind of Marquand story set in the Pacific, savagely charming. Two familiar works are reprinted in full: Bill Mauldin's *Up Front* and John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. Both, on the whole, may survive into posterity. Mauldin's aw-shucks tone may irritate at times, but his deadpan account of a democratic army, enduring the comic horror of war, is compelling to read. And his cartoons are still funny. Hersey's calm accounting of atomic destruction, refreshingly free of argument and cant, remains a model of professional restraint.

One contributor, however, stands apart from the rest: A. J. Liebling. I confess to a near-total avoidance of Liebling in the past, based largely on his cult status and affinity for subjects (gastronomy, Earl Long) of little interest to me. I stand corrected. His dry, dispassionate, elegant accounts, his meticulous detachment, his clear-headed sense, his mixture of phlegm and unexpected clarity, are plainly seductive. A landing craft plumbs toward the Normandy coast, and a soldier is killed, the shell passing through him and tearing into rations: "I went forward to the well deck, which was sticky with a mixture of blood and condensed milk." His natural curiosity parallels the reader's. The death of one eccentric private in Italy prompts Liebling, back in New York, to ferret out his background as a busboy in Manhattan. In 1941, Liebling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

returns to an apathetic, pre–Pearl Harbor America, and patiently listens to one fellow-correspondent rail about complacency: "It was only the second day after Boyer's return, and he still looked at people with astonishment, because they did not seem worried enough. I, who knew the symptoms, understood the way Boyer felt as soon as I saw him come into the office." Americans, it would seem, are never so impassioned as journalists think they ought to be. But in the midst of the preening self-congratulating set—the Shirers and Gellhorns and Murrows in the field—Liebling's narration strikes a civilizing note.

Which comes, in the end, to a fundamental question: What is the purpose of wartime reporting? The effects are obvious enough. After two thousand pages of mayhem and violence, the reader is nearly immune to sensation, accustomed to death in the soldierly fashion. But the challenge often transcends the journalist's art. It is one thing to chronicle the sights and sounds of battle—the glossary abounds with graphic terminology for bombs, torn flesh, and jeeps entombed in mud—but another to explain why troops stand and fight, how death may become more vivid than life, how cowardice and heroism bubble to the surface, and conflict appears to be natural to man. For that, even now, the artist is better equipped than the reporter.

Shorter notices

W. H. Auden
As I Walked Out One Evening:
Songs, Ballads, Lullabies, Limericks,
and Other Light Verse.
Selected by Edward Mendelson.
Vintage, 220 pages, $12 paper

When W. H. Auden suggested editing a collection of light verse for Oxford University Press in 1937, he thought first of calling it *The Oxford Book of Light and Popular Verse*. "Light verse," he noted in his introduction to the resulting volume, "can be serious. It has only come to mean *vers de société*, triolets, smoke-room limericks, because, under the social conditions which produced the Romantic Revival, . . . it has been only in trivial matters that poets have felt in sufficient intimacy with their audience to be able to forget themselves and their singing robes." In its deepest sense, Auden thought, light verse included not only ephemeral ditties but also what Homer wrote—or performed. This is a slightly Pickwickian sense of "light," perhaps. But Auden was certainly right that light verse thrives only when poets enjoy a large, general audience with whom they share a common language and a common way of looking at the world. In such cases, the poet "will not be conscious of himself as an unusual person, and his language will be straightforward and close to ordinary speech."

What Auden called the "Romantic Revival"—which put such a premium on individual genius and valued alienation over conformity—was a natural enemy of light verse and the culture that nurtured it. Modernism, the wary offspring of Romanticism, continued and deepened the enmity. And although he was himself the product of Modernism, Auden always yearned for the kind of community in which light verse could prosper; such yearning may in fact be the distinguishing mark of Auden's own anti-Romantic Romanticism. Bristling with easy technical mastery, his mature work consciously—even, at times, ostentatiously—hankers after the rhythmic and what we might call the metaphysical confidence of such masters as Pope and Dryden. The problem, of course, is that such aspiration—for simplicity, community, oneness—typically betokens not the possession but the distance of such desiderata.

In any event, the extent of Auden's success can be fairly judged from this new collection of his light and popular verse put together by Edward Mendelson, Auden's literary executor and author of *Early Auden*. Poems such as "Musée des Beaux Arts," whose rhetoric is as stately as their sub-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stance, are are not of course represented; nevertheless, this volume does include, as Mr. Mendelson notes in his introduction, some of Auden's best work. Readers familiar with Auden's *oeuvre* will find such well-known poems as "Letter to Lord Byron" (1936), "Lullaby" (1937) ("Lay your sleeping head, my love,/ Human on my faithless arm"), and "O Tell Me the Truth About Love" (1938). There are also numerous lesser-known works and a handful of previously uncollected poems and songs. Some of the poems are "light" in Auden's expanded sense of the term; many of the most agreeable works, however, are more lite than light. Here, for example, is one of the "Shorts" Auden wrote between 1929 and 1931:

I am beginning to lose patience
With my personal relations.
They are not deep
And they are not cheap.

Auden excelled at a certain species of whimsical bawdy, snippets of which are included in this volume. Two of his more innocent limericks, from 1950, can be quoted here:

A friend, who is not an ascetic,
Writes: "Ireland, my dear, is *magnetic*.
No snakes. Lots of elves
Who just OFFER themselves—
Rather small but MOST sympathetic."

* * *

T. S. Eliot is quite at a loss
When clubwomen bustle across
At literary teas,
Crying: "What, if you please,
Did you mean by *The Mill on the Floss*?"

Among the more serious works included in this volume are a number of love poems and songs from Auden's dramatic works. The chorus of "Death's Echo" (1936), in which Auden alludes through Nietzsche to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, summarizes a dour philosophy of life that, though probably anathema to Auden himself, crystalizes one important strand of Modernist aestheticism: "*Not to be born is the best for man/ The second best is a formal order.*" Emily Dickinson was not *quite* as extreme when she wrote that "After great pain, a formal feeling comes." But the impulse was similar and, in its celebration of the redemptive promise of achieved form, stands behind the creation of most things that deserve the name "poetry," light or otherwise.

—*Roger Kimball*

Siegfried Kracauer
The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays.
Translated, edited, and with an
introduction by Thomas Y. Levin.
Harvard University Press,
403 pages, $49.95; $24.95 paper

A generation or so ago, Siegfried Kracauer's 1947 opus, *From Caligari to Hitler*, a sociological survey of Weimar cinema, used to be, along with Eisenstein on montage, the only film book one could count on finding on literate shelves. No one much read them, but there they were—dense, abstract, analytic, European, and reassuringly left guides to the Seventh Art.

The hectoring, old-fashioned Marxism of the Kracauer book went out of style, and in time there arose on its ruins Cultural Studies. Well, now it turns out that Kracauer was a pioneer of Cultural Studies *avant la lettre*. From 1921 to 1933, he was a regular essayist for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*; in 1963, Kracauer himself collected some of these writings under the title *Das Ornament der Masse*. This volume—or, more precisely, its fuller second edition (Frankfurt, 1977)—has now been translated by Thomas Y. Levin, an assistant professor of German at Princeton. (Kracauer fled to France in 1933 and, eight tortuous years later, wound up in New York; he died there in 1966, in his middle seventies.)

Mr. Levin regards these essays as founding documents in Cultural Theory, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

treats Kracauer as the peer of his Frankfurt friends Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno and as the precursor of Roland Barthes. Kracauer's subjects—city maps, travel and dance, photography (that master subject for Cultural Theory), popular biography, hotel lobbies, shopgirls' taste in movies, and the arcades of Berlin—seem to promise something like those plum puddings of Benjamin and Barthes, heavy with the sugar of theory but spiced with observed specificities. But, alas, Cultural Theory in Kracauer is all recipe and no cake; it was in him barely emerging from the cocoon of Idealist Philosophy. Thus the greater part of each essay is taken up by a philosophizing demonstration of the proposition that such and such an epiphenomenon of popular life is worthy of attention. Again and again Kracauer decants his private blend of Kant, Hegel, and Marx. The world, you see, is moving away from Mythology and toward the reign of Reason (*Vernunft*), but capitalism has thrown up a false rationality (*Ratio*), which looks like Reason but ain't. As he puts it, "the *Ratio* of the capitalist economic system is not reason itself but a murky reason. . . . *It does not encompass man*. The operation of the production is not regulated according to man's needs, and man does not serve as the foundation for the structure of the socioeconomic organization." Popular culture can, all unwittingly, reveal the real structure of this *Ratio* and thus hasten the dawn of *Vernunft*.

Rhythmic gymnastics? "Just one example among many other equally hopeless attempts to reach a higher life from out of mass existence." Popular dance crazes? They manifest the false relationships inherent in capitalist modes of production. Picture palaces and detective novels show "the desolation of *Ratio*"; the hotel lobby is seen, in a labored and unproductive conceit, as "the inverted image of the house of God . . . a negative church." Kracauer likes to pose as the (theoretical) champion of the tastes of shopgirls, whose enthrallment to kitsch is seen as somehow more honest and more socially revelatory than the obfuscatingly arty penchants of their bourgeois masters. This notion is embryonic in Kracauer, but those of us who have lived to see the lingerie of Madonna a more prestigious object of academic study than, say, the novels of Nabokov or the ballets of Balanchine have every reason to regret it was not strangled at birth.

There is, finally, the question of the positive values propounded by Kracauer. Writing about such best sellers of the time as Emil Ludwig's admiring biographies of Goethe, Bismarck, and Napoleon, Kracauer declares that "if there is a confirmation of the end of individualism, it can be glimpsed in the museum of great individuals that today's literature puts on a pedestal." He finds, however, that there is one "biographical work"—an autobiography, actually—which portrays a new type of individual "different from the one aimed at in bourgeois literature" because it "does not claim to have a reality of its own but becomes real only through its transparency with regard to reality." And who is this autobiographer whose very autobiography enacts the end of the individual, the death of the author? Trotsky. Poor Kracauer could imagine no better incarnation of his utopian *Vernunft* than the author of the Red Terror.

—Donald Lyons

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notebook

The Robert Hughes medicine show

by Roger Kimball

[T]he arts have recourse to every species of imposture; and these devices sometimes go so far as to defeat their own purpose.
—Alexis de Tocqueville

If I believed in reincarnation, I should wager that the art critic Robert Hughes was once a renowned patent-medicine salesman—in the Old West, perhaps, or maybe even in the less civilized reaches of his native Australia. The successful purveyor of nostrums must know his audience: how to flatter and cajole them and, especially, how to play on their fears. A certain smarminess does not come amiss. Sometimes the ills he warns about are real, sometimes they are completely imaginary. He must be ready to deal with both. And because the specifics he peddles are unfailingly bogus—even, occasionally, downright harmful—he must have command of a mesmerizing rhetoric in order to make a sale. It also helps if he knows the quickest way out of town.

What we might call the patent-medicine side of Robert Hughes has been obvious for some time. It was, for example, on prominent display in "The Shock of the New," the television series on modern art that Mr. Hughes did for the BBC in 1980 and that was later shown on PBS and, in expanded form, published as a book. It was also on view in *Culture of Complaint* (1993), his contribution to the debate over political correctness. *Culture of Complaint* was a breathtaking performance. Mr. Hughes managed to adopt the argument against political correctness made by conservatives *while at the same time* preserving his liberal credentials. He did this by the simple device of attacking conservatives even as he deployed their arguments and recycled their ideas and examples. It was a neat trick. *Culture of Complaint* was a best seller, and one imagines that Mr. Hughes's rivals in the patent-medicine business were green with envy—or was it from overexposure to his latest concoction?

In any case, Mr. Hughes is back, this time on the subject of public funding of culture. In "Why America Shouldn't Kill Cultural Funding," his cover story for the August 7 issue of *Time* magazine, Mr. Hughes has pulled into town with a new wagon full of his old medicine. It is difficult to imagine a more inviting topic for his talents. The complaint may be psychosomatic, but the symptoms are vivid: dizziness, blurred vision, inability to think clearly, and a propensity to frenzied moralism. In fact, the issue of public funding of culture has induced a kind of mass hysteria among *bien pensants* liberals. For complicated reasons having to do partly with cultural snobbery, partly with the widespread corruption of establishment values by a Sixties-style radicalism, institutions like the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting have become synecdoches for the entire liberal world view. For many, it seems, the prospect of life

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

without the NEA or "All Things Considered" is tantamount to an existential crisis: political catastrophe and moral collapse rolled into one.

Mr. Hughes preys expertly on these anxieties, dispensing the dreaded words "Republican" and "Newt Gingrich" to maximum effect. "The Republican leadership in Congress," he intones, "means to sever all links between American government and American culture." He speaks of "freshmen ideologues . . . squeaking with Newtish zeal" who are bent on a policy of "cultural defoliation—an attempt to destroy 'liberal' habitat." (Promises, promises.) Nor is a little crudity beneath him: "These boys and girls aren't even cultural Neanderthals. They're Jurassic." Gee. Subtlety is not one of Mr. Hughes's strengths. What if the National Endowment for the Arts really were to be abolished: would that put America "alone among the nations of the world"? No, Mr. Hughes writes, offering his readers a bottle called "Sarcasm": "little of Haiti's national budget goes to culture. Zaïre does not support a national theater, and cultural grants in Rwanda, even for victim art, may be assumed to be fairly small."

Not edifying, perhaps. But students of bombast will appreciate the skill with which Mr. Hughes wields his contradictions and sophistical equivocations. He is a master at the disarming *non sequitur*. In one sentence he complains that, "ever since the Puritans," the arts in America have "always had to prove how moral they are"—the thought of questioning the moral tenor of an art work naturally being anathema to a sophisticate like Robert Hughes. A bit later he approvingly quotes James Madison to the effect that Americans owe it to "the cause of free government to prove by their establishments . . . that their political institutions are as favorable to the intellectual and moral improvement of Man as they are conformable to his individual and social rights." But isn't a concern about "moral improvement" exactly the sort of thing that Mr. Hughes excoriates in critics of the NEA? And how does James Madison come into the discussion, anyway?

As it happens, Mr. Hughes is fond of making references to the Founding Fathers, probably feeling that invoking them adds tone to his argument. At one point he tells us that "America's Founding Fathers had no doubt about the necessity of the arts in a democracy. [Really?] They were radicals and revolutionaries who believed that the arts should be available to the many, not the privileged few." Ah, yes: Alexander Hamilton, the radical; James Madison, the firebrand. And notice the sly way in which Mr. Hughes introduces the idea that "the arts should be available to the many, not the privileged few." The implication is that critics of public funding for culture must be on the side of privilege.

At least, that's one implication. It is part of Mr. Hughes's method to take every possible position on every issue. At one moment, he beats the drum of democratic egalitarianism; the next he is insisting that "the NEA should be more elitist—rigorously so, in fact." Almost every liberal bugbear is conjured up: Rush Limbaugh, George Will, and above all the "insatiable Christian right wing." "America," he writes, "is the only country in the Western world with a strong, and vengeful, current of Fundamentalist apocalyptic religion." Did someone say "apocalyptic"? With the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, Mr. Hughes informs us, "new Antichrists and minor devils have to be found inside America." He ought to know, having uncovered so many himself.

Mr. Hughes admits that the sums of money involved are paltry. According to his own statistic, private patronage of culture currently outpaces public funding by a ratio of 16 to 1. He makes the familiar argument that even the relatively small sums expended are important, symbolically and as a means of attracting other support. "Over the past quarter-century, NEA seed money has been a boon and a blessing to America's myriad cultural outlets." Perhaps so. But the question Mr. Hughes neglects to ask is whether,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over the last quarter-century, those "myriad cultural outlets" have been a boon to American culture? After all, we aren't talking about the upkeep of the Lincoln Memorial or support for the New York Philharmonic. Among the spectacles those myriad outlets have supported with the taxpayers' money have been Andres Serrano's image of a crucifix submerged in urine, Robert Mapplethorpe's sadomasochistic photographs, and all manner of grotesque "performance art" featuring bodily effluvia.

Mr. Hughes acknowledges that "the NEA should not have set itself up as the Lady Bountiful of the so-called cutting edge, as it did in the '80s." But taxpayer support of extreme figures such as Serrano or Mapplethorpe is only part of the problem. The real issue is whether spending public money aids or degrades the life of high culture in America. Mr. Hughes notes that "there was great art, drama, writing, and scholarship in America before 1965, when the endowments were founded." The uncomfortable question he never asks is, What about American culture *since* 1965? Did the formation of the National Endowments and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting usher in a golden age of artistic achievement? Or have the last thirty years seen a progressive disintegration of intellectual and cultural standards throughout American society? Bruce Nauman, Keith Haring, Karen Finley, Mike Kelley—these are among the aesthetic nonentities celebrated by leading arts institutions today.

The truth is that the Metropolitan Museum of Art got along just fine before the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts. So did the New York City Ballet and the New York Philharmonic. Writers from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Robert Frost somehow managed to write without public largess, and neither Thomas Eakins nor David Smith depended on public grants to undertake their art. Allowing that "dedicated people create ingenious strategies of survival for themselves," Mr. Hughes demands "But why should they have to?" To which one might reply, Why shouldn't they? Why should someone who puts himself forward as an artist have an automatic claim on the public purse? For Mr. Hughes, the fact that the dancer Twyla Tharp lacks the money to have her own permanent company is "a national embarrassment." But perhaps Twyla Tharp—a minor artist, after all—does not merit such an establishment, particularly at taxpayer expense?

Like many liberal commentators, Mr. Hughes speaks ominously about the influence of "market forces" on cultural activity. "Newt and his -oids," he writes in one charming passage, "resent PBS's small measure of independence from 'market forces' —from corporate and hence, ultimately, political control." What he doesn't acknowledge is that talent attracts opportunity—and it does so nowhere more than in a capitalist economy where market forces produce so much surplus wealth.

Mr. Hughes begins his essay by quoting Alexis de Tocqueville on the arts in America and then asking "What would Tocqueville have thought of today's assaults on the fabric of America's public culture?" More to the point, what would Tocqueville have thought of this performance by Robert Hughes? "Hypocrisy reigns," Mr. Hughes sniffs. "The right complains (with reason) about the dumbing-down of American education and then wants to kill one of the essential means of its spread and improvement," i.e., the National Endowment for the Humanities. He goes on to make similar claims about the importance of PBS (which he describes as "intelligent television") and the NEA. The real question, however, is whether such institutions have contributed more to the elevation or degradation of cultural life in this country. Mr. Hughes is correct about the prevalence of hypocrisy. But he is wrong about its provenance. Since he brought Tocqueville into the discussion, it seems appropriate to let that keen observer have the last word: "The hypocrisy of virtue is of every age, but the hypocrisy of luxury belongs more particularly to the ages of democracy."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

FALL ISSUE

We Did It Our Way

(Or how the chaos, unpredictability, contradictions, and complexity of the American system undid both Communism and Apartheid)

John Chettle

Predicting Soviet Collapse

The CIA Got It Right!

Bruce D. Berkowitz & Jeffrey T. Richelson

Our Asia Policy

Chalmers Johnson *Robert Zoellick*

Alliances for a New Era

Josef Joffe *Richard Haass*

Harvey Mansfield on Michael Lind

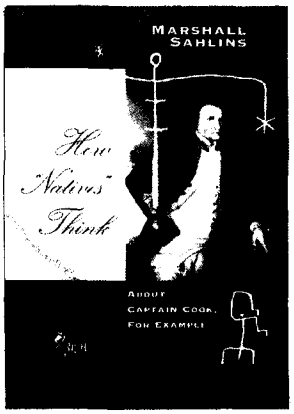
Charles Wolf, Jr. on Francis Fukuyama

Daniel Pipes: Dealing with Fundamentalist Islam
Eric Jones: The Price of Information
Ian Gambles: Lost Time—The Forgetting of the Cold War

Number 41 • Fall 1995 • $7.00

Subscribe now (4 issues for $26) and receive our special issue on **"The Strange Death of Soviet Communism"** absolutely free.
Send check, Visa, AmEx, or Mastercard number to:
The National Interest; Dept. NI; PO Box 3000; Denville, NJ 07834
or call (202) 467-4884 for further information. 4NCTN

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



How "Natives" Think

ABOUT CAPTAIN COOK, FOR EXAMPLE

MARSHALL SAHLINS

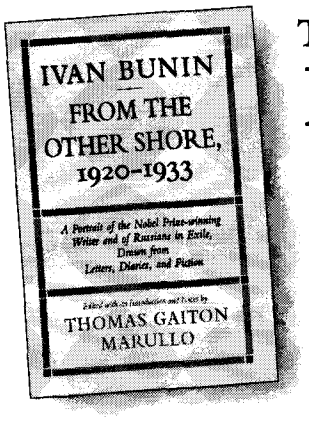
"*How 'Natives' Think* is a fierce, passionate, witty, and learned polemic. Marshall Sahlins's debate with Gananath Obeyesekere's *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* is an indispensable contemporary guide to how anthropologists think. More precisely, Sahlins forcefully articulates his position in a major and highly significant argument about history and cultural difference, an argument with powerful implications for the entire field of cultural studies."—Stephen Greenblatt, University of California, Berkeley

"A forceful, learned and persuasive counterattack. . . . Sahlins makes the case that Captain Cook, whatever Mr. Obeyesekere's anti-imperialist politics may lead him to believe, was indeed taken by the Hawaiians to be a god, one whom they killed when he fell from grace."—Richard Bernstein, *New York Times*

Cloth $24.95 328 pages

The University of Chicago Press

5801 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60637


IVAN BUNIN
FROM THE OTHER SHORE, 1920–1933
A Portrait of the Nobel Prize-winning Writer and of Russians in Exile, Drawn from Letters, Diaries, and Fiction
THOMAS GAITON MARULLO

THOMAS GAITON MARULLO

Ivan Bunin: From the Other Shore, 1920–1933

In this second volume of his major work on Bunin, Marullo recreates his life in exile, chiefly in Paris, after escaping from his newly bolshevized country in 1920. He offers a vivid picture of a man without a country, and a window on the lively but despairing and often fractious community of Russian emigrés in Paris in the twenties. "A fascinating reconstruction of Bunin's creative and personal life."—Marc Raeff

The first volume is also available: *Ivan Bunin: Russian Requiem, 1885–1920*

Ivan R. Dee, Publisher

At your bookseller, or order toll-free 1-800-634-0226 with a major credit card.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Sound of Great Ideas!®

The actual voices of . . . W. H. Auden • Robert Frost • Edwin Newman • Gilbert Highet • Edward DeBono • William Saroyan • Robert Lowell • Bruno Bettelheim • Sir Edmund Hillary • Stephen Spender . . . and many others.

HEAR what these provocative thinkers have to say about self-discovery, the quality of life, the nature of the creative mind, changes taking place in the world today, and what you can do to bring about change.

There's a difference in **hearing** new ideas rather than simply reading them. The author is able to provide his or her unique emphasis in ways impossible to accomplish in print. Pauses and tonal changes become meaning and create insights and increased understanding.

And audio cassettes provide a medium for learning experiences that can be shared simultaneously with someone else, thus encouraging immediate discussion and interaction.

Today's audio cassettes capture the inflections, nuances and flavor of the original speaker, and let you hear them over and over while driving, cooking, jogging, etc. Since some of these voices will never be heard again, here's your opportunity to savor the sound of great ideas that have shaped today's world, and to own these cassettes for your library.

From the more than 4,000 titles in the prestigious Audio-Forum Library, we have selected 26 extraordinary recordings. Imagine hearing these dynamic personalities in the intimacy of your own home! The regular price per cassette is $13.95. **But now for the special price of $9.95 you have the opportunity to listen whenever and wherever you choose. PLUS for every 3 cassettes you buy, we'll send you a cassette of your choice FREE!**

"The Sound of Great Ideas" from
Audio-Forum,
Suite P640, 96 Broad St.,
Guilford, CT 06437. (203) 453;9794

The 26 audio cassettes listed here were chosen by a panel of experts who were asked to select only tapes which would be timely and relevant. Each has passed the simple test of genuine interest: "Would you want to listen to this tape again?"

HEAR these famous speakers:

- **A** **W. H. Auden:** *The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (59 min.)
- **B** **Richard Avedon:** *An Interview with Richard Avedon* (60 min.)
- **C** **Bruno Bettelheim:** *Man's Identity in a Mass Society* (48 min.)
- **D** **Otto Bettman:** *The Good Old Days: They Were Terrible* (55 min.)
- **E** **Nathaniel Branden:** *Dealing With the Gifted Child* (48 min.)
- **F** **Carlos Castaneda:** *Don Juan: The Sorcerer* (38 min.)
- **G** **Alistair Cooke:** *America: An Outside View* (55 min.)
- **H** **Edward De Bono:** *How to Change Ideas* (55 min.)
- **I** **Erich Fromm:** *To Have or to Be: The Nature of the Psyche* (56 min.)
- **J** **Robert Frost:** *An Evening with Robert Frost* (55 min.)
- **K** **Buckminster Fuller:** *Twentieth-Century Renaissance* (55 min.)
- **L** **Thor Heyerdahl:** *Waters of the World* (58 min.)
- **M** **Gilbert Highet:** *The Art of Invective/A Bouquet of Poison Ivy* (30 min.)
- **N** **Sir Edmund Hillary:** *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win* (55 min.)
- **O** **G. Wilson Knight:** *Shakespeare and the English Language* (30 min.)
- **P** **Robert Lowell:** *Reads and Discusses His Poetry* (28 min.)
- **Q** **Joseph Mazzeo:** *The Idea of Progress: Science and Poetry* (46 min.)
- **R** **Ashley Montagu:** *The Nature of Human Nature* (48 mn.)
- **S** **Edwin Newman:** *Decline and Fall of American Language* (55 min.)
- **T** **J. Robert Oppenheimer:** *Relevance of Literature to Science* (19 min.)
- **U** **Asimov & Pohl:** *Science Fiction: The Early Days* (55 min.)
- **V** **William Saroyan:** *The Real World of the Writer* (48 min.)
- **W** **Upton Sinclair:** *A Pen to Change America* (40 min.)
- **X** **Stephen Spender:** *T.S. Eliot and George Orwell* (41 min.)
- **Y** **Paul Tillich/Adela Rogers St. Johns:** *An Interview* (60 min.)
- **Z** **Eudora Welty:** *Learning to Write Fiction* (53 min.)

☐**YES!** Please send me the following selections at $9.95 each plus $1.00 shipping charge for the first tape, and .50 for each additional tape. (For shipments to CT, please add sales tax.)

I understand that for every 3 cassettes I order, I will get one FREE!

My selections: ◯◯◯◯◯◯

My free selection: ◯ ◯

NAME (print) _____

ADDRESS, APT# _____

CITY, STATE, ZIP _____

SIGNATURE _____

Total amount of order: $_____
(Including tax and shipping)

☐ Check or money order enclosed
☐ VISA ☐ American Express
☐ MasterCard ☐ Diners Club
☐ Discover Card

Expiration Date:_____

Card #_____

Signature_____

Mail To: **AUDIO-FORUM®**
Suite P640, 96 Broad St.,
Guilford, CT 06437. (203) 453;9794

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dick Armey's *Freedom Revolution*

The most far-reaching proposal *ever* from a sitting congressional leader

After the Contract with America, what next? Rest on our laurels?

Hardly. Rep. Dick Armey, key architect of the Contract, now calls for a new American revolution, a radical return to the limited government of the Founding Fathers.

- In *The Freedom Revolution*, Armey shows how free people can take power back from government, and proposes a breathtaking plan for smashing the ruling Washington establishment . . .
- *Cut government by HALF*: 12 major programs on Armey's hit list
- *Scrap the tax code*; replacing it with a flat tax
- *End the government monopoly on public schools*—returning power to parents
- *Free the economy* from arrogant federal regulators and "put all the little *potentates on the Potomac* in their place."
- *Social Security?* Hold government to the same standard as private investment funds.
- *ZERO tolerance for lawbreakers*, taking the profit out of crime

YOURS FREE!

"Dick Armey is a pioneer on the trail toward common sense government. This book shows us the way." —*Rush Limbaugh*

Arriving in Congress in 1984, Armey rocketed into the leadership, lancing liberal myths all the way with his trade mark wit and common-sense style. After a decade behind the lines, he shows why freedom works and Big Government failed. Among Dick's gems:

- "The politics of greed always comes wrapped in the language of love."
- "Compassion without understanding can be cruel."
- "You no longer have to be knowledgeable at all to be an expert. You just have to be 'concerned' or 'passionate.' . . . I will never forget the congressional hearing I once watched on agriculture policy. The witnesses: Jane Fonda, Jessica Lange, and Sissy Spacek—on hand to share the knowledge they'd recently acquired playing farm women in movies. . . .
- "Republicans, haunted by the fear that the public will not understand, are reluctant to state their views bluntly. Democrats are always afraid the public will understand, so they distort information early and often."
- "You can't put your finger on a problem when you've got it to the wind."

How to get this $24.95 book absolutely free!

How the Club Works

Every 4 weeks (13 times a year) you get a free copy of the Club Bulletin which reviews and offers you a fine selection of the most important books for conservatives like you. ★ If you want the Featured Selection, do nothing; it will come automatically. ★ If you don't want the Featured Selection or you want an Alternate, indicate your wishes on the handy card enclosed with your Bulletin and return it by the deadline date. ★ The majority of Club books are offered at 20-50% discounts, plus a charge for shipping and handling. ★ As soon as you buy and pay for 3 books at regular Club prices, your membership may be ended at any time, either by you or by the Club. ★ If you ever receive a Featured Selection without having had 10 days to decide if you want it, you may return it at Club expense for full credit. ★ The Club will offer regular Superbargains, mostly at 70-90% discounts, plus shipping and handling. Superbargains do not count toward fulfilling your Club obligation, but do enable you to buy fine books at giveaway prices. ★ Only one membership per household.

CONSERVATIVE BOOK CLUB
33 Oakland Avenue • Harrison, N.Y. 10528

Please accept my membership in the Club and send me Dick Armey's FREEDOM REVOLUTION, a $24.95 value, absolutely FREE. In return, I agree to buy 3 additional books at regular Club bargain prices (usually 20-50% off list) over the next 18 months. I also agree to the Club's other simple rules spelled out in this coupon.

NEW C-5

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The most glamorous night of the year — and here are all 65 of them!

$59.95 in stores — Yours for $6.95!

Beautiful pictures? Stunning design? Of course. But that's not all you get here. Ace entertainment reporter Robert Osborne gives you the *official* history of the first 65 years of the Academy Awards.

Yes, this is the ultimate Oscar book . . .

★ 546 illustrations — including many celebrity photos *never published before*

★ 118 of these photos in gorgeous color

★ Decade-by-decade: the Academy from its founding

★ Year-by-year: the ceremonies (date, time, place, emcee, major TV credits)

★ EVERY Academy Award, nominees as well as winners, in EVERY category year-by-year thru 1992

★ EVERY honorary Award and special citation

★ Giant index: well over 7,000 Oscar winners and nominees for Best Picture, Best Actor and Actress, Best Supporting Actor and Actress, Best Director — plus Awards for writing, cinematography, film editing, art and set direction, costume design, sound recording, shorts, documentaries and foreign-language films

★ HUGE 9″ x 12″ coffee-table size

★ 352 pages

★ Printed thruout on costly stock for superior photo reproduction

★ EXTRA! Oscar memories from 120 winners — written especially for this volume!

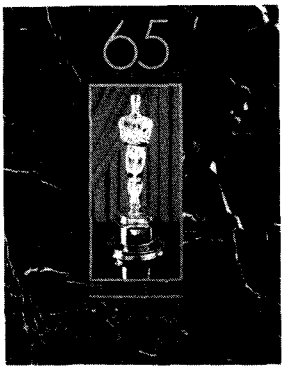
★ EXTRA! All the Academy presidents

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Oscar Night! Now all the excitement is captured in the new luxury-size volume on Oscar's 65 years. The celebrated art-book publisher, Abbeville, is front-and-center with the most lavish film book of the year.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Fashions change in Hollywood, but glamour endures. Here is a lifetime of Hollywood glamour — at its most glamorous.



Mail coupon to get this $59.95 beauty for only $6.95!

How the Club Works

Every 4 weeks (13 times a year) you get a free copy of the Club bulletin, PREVIEWS, which offers the Featured Selection plus a nice choice of Alternates: books on films, TV, music, occasionally tapes and videocassettes. ★ If you want the Featured Selection, do nothing. It will come automatically. ★ If you don't want the Featured Selection or you do want an Alternate, indicate your wishes on the handy card enclosed and return it by the deadline date. ★ The majority of Club books are offered at 20-30% discounts, plus a charge for shipping and handling. ★ As soon as you buy and pay for 4 books, tapes or videocassettes at regular Club prices, your membership may be ended at any time, either by you or by the Club. ★ If you ever receive a Featured Selection without having had 10 days to decide if you want it, you may return it at Club expense for full credit. ★ For every book, tape or videocassette you buy at regular Club price, you receive one or more Bonus Book Certificates. These entitle you to buy many Club books at deep discounts, usually 60-80% off. These Bonus Books do not count toward fulfilling your Club obligation but do enable you to buy fine books at giveaway prices. ★ PREVIEWS also includes news about members and their hobbies. You are welcome to send in similar items. The Club will publish any such item it deems suitable, FREE. This is a real CLUB! ★ Good service. No computers! ★ Only one membership per household.

MOVIE/ENTERTAINMENT BOOK CLUB

33 Oakland Avenue • Harrison, N.Y. 10528

I enclose $6.95. Please accept my membership in the Club and send, postpaid, Robert Osborne's $59.95 luxury volume, *65 Years of the Oscar.* I agree to buy 4 additional books, tapes or videotapes at regular Club prices over the next 2 years. I also agree to the Club rules spelled out in the coupon.

NC-11

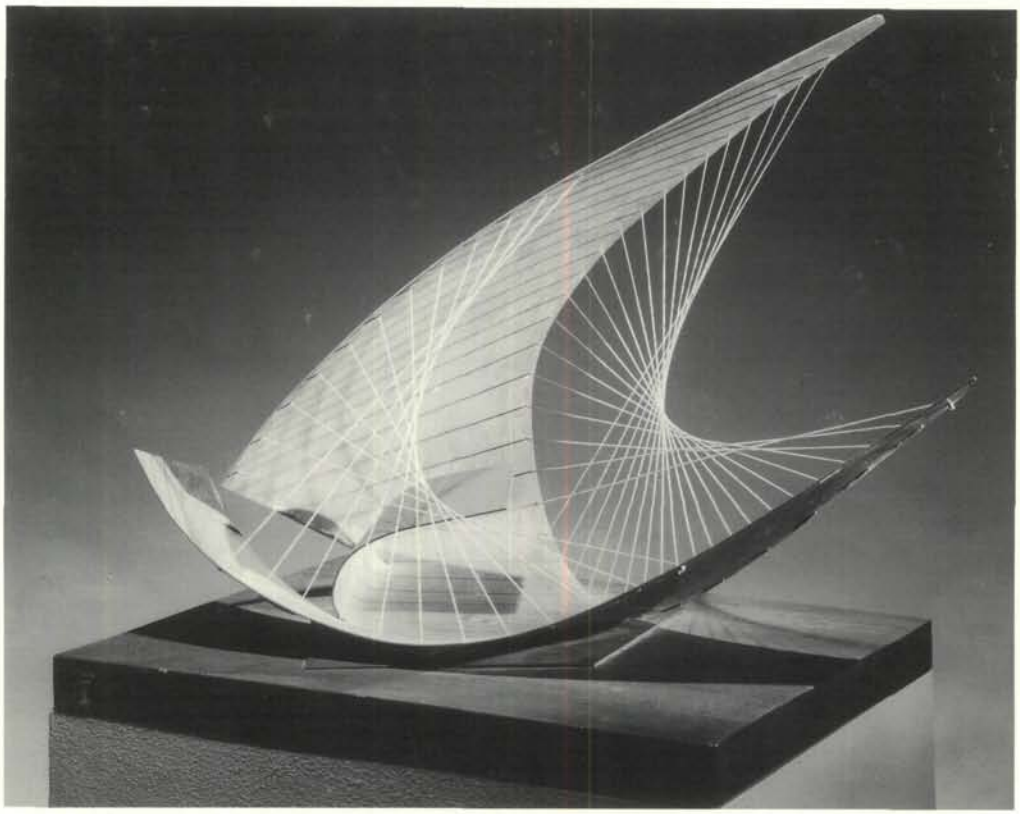
Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

19TH & 20TH CENTURY EUROPEAN MASTERS



Barbara Hepworth. *Stringed Figure (Curlew) I*, 1956. Brass and strings on wooden base, 15 3/4 x 21 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches

Paintings Sculpture Drawings

Exhibiting at Salon des Beaux Arts, Paris, Quai Branly, 20-25 September 1995, booth no. 3

ACHIM MOELLER FINE ART

52 EAST 76TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10021

TELEPHONE 212 988 8483 FAX 439 6663

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 503
New York NY 10019

Second Class Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED